

[Upbeat music starts, then fades]

Sabrina: Hi, everyone. Welcome to the first ever episode of LitTea. I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and today I'm joined by John Cusick, literary agent-slash-senior VP at Folio Literary Management. He's also the author of the YA novels GIRL PARTS and CHERRY MONEY BABY and the middle grade series DIMENSION WHY. And I'm super excited to get started! So...let's do this thing!

Sabrina: [Upbeat music stops]

Sabrina: Hi.

John: Hi.

Sabrina: Hi. So you want to get started?

John: Yeah.

Sabrina: Awesome. And I love that we're both wearing our, like, matching twin power glasses over here.

John: Oh, yeah. They're definitely writer glasses, I think.

Sabrina: Yeah. Mine always falls down my nose. I got this stuff. It's called NerdWax.

John: Yeah, we got that, too. But it didn't work. I couldn't get it to work for me.

Sabrina: Okay, so mine...it makes mine stick halfway down my nose. [both laugh]

John: Right. So it's not going to go all the way off, but it'll stick. Yeah. No, I know. I have the same problem.

Sabrina: Mine go down, like, so far. My nose is so little, it's awful.
[John laughed at me]
All right, so how did you get into agenting?

John:

Well, when I was in college, my work study job at the school was working at our local independent press. So it was like West Press. It did mostly poetry, and I was a permissions assistant, which meant that when someone wanted to use, say, a line from a Robert Blythe poem in their book as an epigraph or something, they would call us and I would do the paperwork. And I really liked it. I thought the book business is really a fun place to work if you have to work anywhere, right? And if you're going to be in a business, might as well be in a fun one. So after college, I moved to New York, and I started interviewing for editorial assistant positions because I didn't really know anything else. I thought editor was really the only track in publishing, and sort of by accident, I ended up interviewing to be a literary agent's personal assistant. Really, it was a dog walker's job. But what caught my attention about it was that it was to assist a literary agent. And I was fortunate enough in Scott Treimel, my first boss, to find a guy who really was interested in mentoring me. And I learned a ton from him. And working for Scott, I quickly realized a couple of things. One was that the kids book world was definitely one that I wanted to stay in. Scott was exclusively a kidlit agent, so that's kind of how I wound up in this space. But working for him, it didn't take long to realize that I really liked kidlit publishing. I really liked the people. It was a very accessible space. It's a very progressive space. It's got a long way to go. But compared to other parts of publishing or other parts of media, I mean, it's a pretty cool place to be. And then beyond that, working with him for a few months or a year or so, I started to realize that I really wanted to be on the agenting side of the fence. Rather than editorial, I really wanted to have that very close relationship with the author and to kind of make my own way. That's the fun part about an agenting career is that you kind of live or die off your own submissions and cleverness and whatnot. And that's very exciting. So, yeah, it was kind of an accident that it happened. That was the first proper publishing job that I had. But being there, I realized that, yes, this is where I want to stay. I kind of, like, got on at the first stop and just stayed there.

Sabrina: Okay, cool. When did you switch to Folio?

John: I was with Scott for a few years, and then I moved over to a literary agency called Greenhouse Literary, which is based mostly in the UK. Now, Chelsea Everly is a US based agent there. She's great. And I was there for a few years, very happy. But Folio came calling, and it was a bigger agency with a bigger office, or I should say *an* office. Greenhouse was all remote at the time. And so for a couple of reasons, moving up to a bigger place and having some more kind of office resources and back office resources, for a number of reasons, it just felt like a better fit for me at the time. And I've been here ever since. And it's great. I mean, I couldn't imagine being at a better agency for me, it's a large group now. It's a lot bigger than when I started, but it still feels like a very intimate gathering of agents. We work together a lot. I do a lot of co agenting, so it's very convivial that way. So, yeah, it's been a great experience being here. Though very different from the more work from home experiences I had earlier in my career.

Sabrina: Okay, so what book made you a reader?

John: So that's a good question, and there's probably a lot of answers. I think that the main one, and probably the easy answer that I got to go with is *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. I was a Sci-Fi nerd as a kid, and I loved comedy. I had a really goofy sense of humor and a friend of my stepfather's, this lovely man, this young guy. He probably was in his 30s, but he seemed ancient to me at the time. [Sabrina giggles] When I was a kid, like, just struck up a conversation with me at a dinner party, like, talking to the kid at the table, and the next time he came to visit, he's like, you should read this. And he brought the omnibus *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, like, four books in one hardcover. And I was just instantly obsessed. And I think ever since, like, very comedic genre stuff, that kind of very irreverent sense of humor. And I think one of the great things about Douglas Adams is he always seems to write with the reader's experience first and foremost in his mind. I think that kind of, like, very performative, reader friendly writing is the sort of stuff that I

really am drawn to as an agent. So I'll draw that connection. I think as an early reader, that kind of joyfulness really spoke to me in the writing and as an agent, that's the kind of thing I seek as well. In between, there was definitely a very pretentious period that I went through in college, and I still love very pretentious and very literary books. Next to Douglas Adams, my favorite author is Vladimir Nabokov, but those two together are like the perfect bizarre Venn diagram of my taste, I would say pre-publishing as I was coming in.

Sabrina: Well, you have a background in Russian literature as well.

John: Yeah, the Nabokov thing is probably a bit of a giveaway, but I became a Russian literature major because I wanted to take a Nabokov course that they were offering at my school. But I love Russian literature. It's hard to describe what it is about that I love. But I'll start by talking about, like, Dostoevsky, and he loves a good, wild dinner party scene in the middle of a book, you know what I mean, where everyone just starts swearing and throwing food, and I just love that. [both laugh] So I think that his writing was definitely a big joy for me in college and beyond. But, yeah, I love Russian literature. It's very meta as a body of fiction. A lot of it is written to be like, oh, this is a book that someone found, and now you're going to get to read their stories that they wrote. But that author is an imaginary construction... Anyways, I've gotten off on a long tangent, but Russian literature is very cool. That's all.
[Both laugh]

Sabrina: Hey I asked, and it made sense with your response. Okay, so is Hitchhiker's Guide also what made you want to be a writer?

John: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I definitely wanted to write stories since I could read. Those two things always seem one and the same. It's like you see a cartoon when you're a kid and you want to pretend to be in that cartoon, and if you read something, then you want to write something. So I think it was always kind of there. But books like Hitchhikers definitely had me going to my computer and tackling really wild, silly stories where just goofy

things happen one after the other. There's another, much less famous author, Robert Asprin, who wrote a series of fantasy novels for adults, but that were all very comedic and they centered around a young character. They might have been considered YA had they been published a few decades later.

Sabrina: Oh, interesting.

John: But both Robert Asprin and Douglas Adams were very silly, and their adventures were very seemingly irreverent and sort of random. And as a young writer, to feel like, oh, wait a second, it doesn't matter what happens as long as it's fun. That was definitely an encouraging kind of philosophy to have, you know what I mean? Going in. I think if I had started being obsessed with writers whose plots were a lot denser or were much more complex, maybe I would have been more intimidated, but they gave me a false sense of confidence because they made it look so easy.

Sabrina: You can do anything.

John: Yeah, exactly. They made it look easy.

Sabrina: Nice. Okay. What do you do outside of agent and writing?

John: Uh.
[long pause and giggles on both ends]

Sabrina: It's okay. No, that's okay. I do nothing, so.

John: I play the piano. I've written musicals for fun. Just as a lark. For a while, I was working on a musical about the Great British Bake Off, but with a murder in it.

Sabrina: Yes. Oh, my gosh.

John: I think there's already a Great British Baking musical on the way out, so I think someone scooped me on that.

Sabrina: Is there really?

John: Yeah, I think so. Someone sent me a text this morning being like, oh, they got to it first. So I think that there's another so there will be a Great British Baking musical of some kind, it sounds like, but yeah, so I love to do that. My wife and I, we love to go to the beach. We'll go to Coney Island on the weekends and ride the roller coaster like we're ten and eat too much fried food on the beach. That's just one of my favorite things to do in the summer, is to be there. So yeah, I think it's like books and sun and sand. Those three things together are my fave.

Sabrina: And the piano.

John: And the piano, too. The piano you can't bring to the beach quite as easily.

Sabrina: No [both laugh] you should try, though. That would make a really great photoshoot.

John: Well, my mother is a busker. She plays piano in the subway.

Sabrina: Oh, awesome.

John: And she has built her own mobile piano unit with wheels and a keyboard that she can wheel down into the subway.

Sabrina: That is so incredible. Oh my gosh.

John: Yeah. So it runs in the family. There is precedent in the Cusick family for mobile piano playing.

Sabrina: I love this. I did not know I was going to learn this about you. That's amazing.

[John laughs]

We kind of covered Folio questions as well, a little bit. And you said that it is a main office or central office that you have?

John: Yeah, Folio has a central office in Manhattan. During pre-pandemic times, I was usually there three or four days a week and then working from home one or two. It's great to have a central office on occasion. It's great to have a place to go and to just see other human beings and kind of interact. Otherwise, an agent's life can get very solitary. Mostly you're working by yourself, kind of looking for new writers, developing their stuff. A lot of reading, a lot of sending stuff out to editors. But you're not usually working on big group projects with people. Right. So getting to interact with other people, I think is really lovely at the Folio office. But I think beyond that, some of the reasons that I really love it as an agent and also as an author, I'm also a Folio client is that we have an amazing, dedicated foreign rights team. So what they do is they just focus on taking Folio's great titles and selling them in translation or say to the UK or Australia, we have a dedicated audio rights person, a dedicated contracts guy. We have in house film advisors and whatnot. So even though I work with my authors very one on one, I think that they have a small agency feel with me. But you've got the big agency back office to back you up, you know what I mean? Like, I've got someone who can negotiate your contracts for you and I've got someone who's focusing on audio. You really do get to have a team when you're represented here. So that's the kind of thing that I think is really great for an author to have. And as an agent, it's great to work in a place that provides those kinds of services.

Sabrina: And you're also a senior vice president there, which is a way up there. So what does that mean? What do you do? How does that differ from just agenting? What kind of responsibilities do you have and such?

John: So very little [both laugh] is the honest answer. But I'll say the way Folio is sort of structured is that a lot of it is based around sales. So as you go on, as you sell more books, as you hit different tiers, your title goes up. And that's also connected to experience. How many years have you been with the company and whatnot. But as you're at the SVP level, like, some of the things that we do is recently we reorganize our internship program so we can start paying our interns.

Sabrina: Yay. Love to see it.

John: Yeah, tomorrow after work I'm going to be doing sort of an extra after work zoom session with our interns and a few other agents because again, pre-pandemic, usually we would take them out for like pizza or a happy hour a couple of times a semester. And now we can't do that. So we're trying to provide something else. So interestingly in terms of what new things have come along with being an SVP. It's a lot of working with sort of the administrative side of the internship program. But I want to say and acknowledge to any of my colleagues listening here that there are others on the team who have done way more for that program than I have. So I don't mean to take credit [both laugh] but just since the question was asked, that's the kind of stuff that I've been more involved in since that title came along.

Sabrina: That's really cool. And do y'all share submissions and stuff?

John: So we don't really share submissions. I will say the truth is I will share something with my colleagues if I don't think it's for me, and I think that it might be for them. And the reverse is definitely true. However, I think the thing for writers to remember if we're going to be really candid is that happens very seldom.

Sabrina: I figured.

John: Yeah, it's a rare bird that I think something would be a really good thing for my colleagues, but for whatever reason, I don't think it would be a good thing for me. That's just a rare combination of elements for a book. I'll say what does sometimes happen in my case is while I do represent some picture books, I'm really not actively taking on new picture book authors. So sometimes someone will send me, say, a picture book text, or maybe they're an author illustrator or something, and I'll think, man, this is really good, or I think it might be really good, but I'm just not in the space right now where I can tackle a picture book or be a great picture book agent to this person. So I'll send it to say, Emily Van Beek, who's closed to queries, but she's a picture book genius, and she does a ton of picture books for Folio. And so

I would send it to her and say, hey, if this is something for you, do you want to reach out to them? Let me know. So that will happen from time to time if it's kind of a genre or a market misfire. And I'll say too, Emily does that for me. She tends to not represent, like, very genre heavy, like Sci-Fi and fantasy text. So sometimes she'll get something that's a little bit too out there for her, but if it sounds really good, she'll refer it to me. So I guess it does happen. It is something that I would say probably happens a couple of times a year at the most.

Sabrina: Okay, so while we're talking about this, do you want to jump into stats and give me some numbers of how many queries you get, how many you request, how many you pass on, that kind of thing?

John: Yeah, sure. This varies, and it has changed over time, but in general, I get about 15 queries a day, and that's seven days a week. So it's like 100 and changes a week. Right. And it has changed over the years. Here's what I'll say. I will say it's probably one in 50 queries will I request a full manuscript for. So it is a very small threshold. In years gone by, I used to request more manuscripts than I do now, and the reason was I had more time to read, and also I had more space on my list. So I was just like, ooh yes, more and more all the time, more. Now I'm much more selective. I can take on fewer new clients, so I tend to be more selective when I'm requesting. So there's a lot more projects where I'm like, man, that sounds pretty good, but I just can't right now. So of those projects that I request, on a busy year I maybe sign on about five or six new clients. I think this is going to be a small year for taking on new people. Like I said, I'm pretty packed up at the moment. But that changes. What will happen is I've noticed for myself is that all of a sudden, at a certain point in the year, three clients, I'll get them all at once, you know what I mean? [Sabrina giggled] Just because the timing will align and the things happen to be there. So it really does vary. And I'll say probably one in five of my new clients doesn't come through the query inbox. So a client maybe refers them or... I don't know, maybe an editor refers them. I've had that happen too. Or an editor has an author whose agent has left, or they're firing them

or whatever, and they'll say, hey, I think you would be great match for this person. Which is always super appreciated, as you can imagine. So those are some of the ways that they'll get to me. But there is a massive volume of querying writers. So it can be a bit of a numbers game just to kind of break through.

Sabrina: Yes, totally. All the numbers. So when you are taking on these clients, what makes an ideal client to you?

John: So this is kind of how the process goes, right? I look around and I say, it's time for some new clients. I have the space. I got to get some new people on the list, and my radar is up 24/7 for what is selling right now. I'm always thinking about what are editors buying? Because I'm not going to say my only job, but my main job for you as an agent is to sell that book to the existing editors in town. So, for instance, I don't have any kids. Sometimes people ask, well, how do you know what kids want to read? And I always say I don't. I have no idea what kids want to read. But I do know what 50 editors in New York want to read. You know what I mean? I need to know what they are acquiring and I trust that they know what kids want to read down the extra step of the line. Does that make sense? So I'm thinking about what are editors buying right now? Are they generally looking for projects that are more upbeat? Are they more open to darker stuff? Like are folks into a particular genre at the moment. Right now, horror is more viable than it has been in the past. My biggest deal last year for a YA book was for a horror novel, right? So, is there a particular genre that at the moment people are kind of more into or more open to? So, there's kind of a field of play in my head before I even start looking at the queries. Once I start looking at the queries, I'm looking for pitches, concepts, that feel viable. So that means that the idea behind the project, like the basic setup or hook feels like something that I think, people are going to want to read that. That sounds exciting and different. And I'm imagining if I describe it to an editor, they would kind of go, 'Oh, cool. Oh wait. And then her father is that person? And they go where? Oh interesting.' Those kinds of reactions. And you can know by instinct if you're having them as an agent, like, are you intrigued? And then if that idea is there in the pitch, in the query,

I'm like, oh, that sounds interesting. I'll go on and I'll read the sample and I start to see how do they write, like, line by line. Do they have a voice that works for the market that they're writing in? Is their writing smooth? Is their voice interesting? Or if not interesting, is it transparent? So I'm not even thinking about the voice. It's wrapped up in the story. So that's where I'm looking at the line level writing. And if those two things are syncing up, where it's like, man, the paragraphs are solid to great, and the pitch is really interesting and intriguing, I'll request the full manuscript. And at that point I'm reading for OK, the pitch seems good, the line level writing seems good. Do they follow through on it? Like, does it keep my attention? If there are problems in the manuscript, are they fixable problems? Because I don't expect a manuscript to be perfect when it comes to me. I expect we're going to be working on it. I'm an editorial agent. I'm a writer myself. Like, we get very crafty, so I'm not expecting it to be perfect. But there are certain problems which as an agent, I have the time and the bandwidth to help a writer solve and certain problems I don't. So, for instance, we talked about the voice. Like, I'm reading to see in those first few paragraphs, is the voice there? If that voice isn't there, the line level writing isn't there. I can't teach that to a writer in the course of this manuscript edit.

Sabrina: It's super hard.

John: Right? There are certain techniques I can point out, but if it's not there, that whole book from my subjective point of view, would need to be rewritten to get the voice sounding better, word to word, line to line, right? So that's not a problem I can fix. That writer needs to keep working on their craft, keep writing, keep polishing, but they're not ready for me as an agent yet. But if say halfway through the book, there's a pacing issue, it kind of slows down maybe, or the ending is really like, wow, I really loved it. But at the ending... I once had a manuscript that I absolutely loved and at the very end, the main character feeds the villain's family to him in a soup. [Sabrina giggles] And it was just the most like out of left field. It just didn't work. And I love a twisty ending. It just didn't work. And I remember saying to the author, I'm like,

look, I really like this book, but I got to be honest, this ending really didn't work for me. And she was like, yeah, I really didn't know how to end it. And so we worked together and we found a better ending. But that was like a fixable problem, right? So I'm reading to see what are the issues, are they fixable? Is this something that with a revision or two, I feel like it's going to be ready to go out to editors. So these are kind of the things that I'm evaluating in my head. And if all of those things are aligning and sometimes I'm a third of the way through the book... I'll tell you, Hafsah Faizal's *We Hunt the Flame*. I wanted to offer on that book on the first page.

Sabrina: Oh, wow.

John: The pitch was amazing. And I knew from the writing just the way this author introduced her main character. I'm like, this person can write. Like, I just knew and I think I offered on it on that sample. And she was like, why don't you read the book first? [both laugh] And I was like, okay.

Sabrina: That's hilarious.

John: But it's true. So sometimes you know that fast, sometimes it takes longer to figure out whether or not something is going to work. But once you do, I will usually then ask the author if they would like to hop on the phone. And at some point over the course of that call, I'm usually deciding whether or not I'm going to make an offer. I'm checking to see does this person and I have a natural rapport? Like, do we communicate in a way that is compatible? Does it feel like we could work together for a decade and talk constantly and have the same sense of humor or at least compatible ones? You're checking to see if that personal connection is there because that's important, I think.

Sabrina: It's super important. I mean, there's a lot of ups and downs with it. And especially in the downs, you just, you need someone in your corner.

John: Exactly.

Sabrina: And it shouldn't be like...painful to work with somebody that there's no guarantees on if y'all are going to get paid for it.

John: I think that's really true. And sometimes it's like, you could be on the phone with an agent and think to yourself, there's nothing bad or wrong about this person, but I just don't gel with them. You know what I mean? Like they're just a stick in the mud or like they're way too over the top. Whatever my energy is does not gel with them. And then I think obviously if you're like, wow, I don't have anyone else to choose from, that becomes a bigger decision. But oftentimes if one agent is offering, more than one agent will be interested. I think probably the majority of the time I wonder if that's true.

Sabrina: I wonder if it's true too.

John: I don't know. But I do think it's quite often in my experience that when I'm offering on something, other agents are offering on it simultaneously. But sometimes you do have the privilege of being able to choose between different agents and different agenting styles. But I would say one of the things you can definitely ask, or should be asking an agent on that phone call is about their communication style. How long does it take you to get back to things like figure that stuff out upfront and make sure that their answers are okay with you. Because you're asking, they should give you the honest answer, and so there shouldn't be any confusion down the line. Right? But ask. How long does it take you to get back to your authors? How long does it take you to read a manuscript? What happens if that first book doesn't sell? These are the kind of awkward ask all the awkward questions to begin with, and I'll say, too, that we're expecting them on that phone call. I've got my answers ready to go because I've been asked those questions so many times, so it's totally fine to have those.

Sabrina: Does anyone ever surprise you with a question that you're just like, Whoa, and that was a good one?

John: I'm sure there has been. I wish I could think of one off the top of my head. I think sometimes I'm surprised. I shouldn't be, but I'll say I noticed that some authors have a lot to ask, and it seems like they've got a spreadsheet, and it's very detailed, and it's funny because they'll ask a question saying, like, oh, how long does it take you to read a manuscript and I'll say, this amount of time. Okay... I'm like, was that a good thing? [both laugh] What did someone else say? What did my competition say? Yeah, so I think what I would say is that know that on those calls, the agents are just as nervous because we know we're competing too.

Sabrina: I love hearing that.

John: Yeah, it's true. It's really true. And I have projects that I missed out on, that I offered on, and another agent got that are like, my forever it-could-have-beens, you know what I mean? I'll never get over it.

Sabrina: Aww.
[laughs]
See writers? We break agents hearts too.

John: It's true. Don't think it isn't.

Sabrina: We have gone all over this. I've got all these cute little papers printed out. We just went around this thing in circles. Okay. We did talk about asking agents what the communication style is like, but you didn't tell us what your communication style is like and what you prefer.

John: Yeah, sure. So I have clients that text me. I'm on Twitter with my clients sometimes. I would say, for me, I always respond to authors, my authors within 24 hours of getting an email. And I can't always jump on the phone same day, but I can usually do it within the next day, if not on the same day. So I think. I'm pretty available and communicative as agents go. Like I said, I don't work with an assistant. We do an internship program and I do occasionally work with a one on one intern, but I always work

with my authors one on one. So there's never a buffer. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Different agents are different. And then reading wise, it usually takes me about 60 days to get a client and edit letter back. And the interesting thing is that's not because it takes me 60 days to read the book, usually only takes about two weeks to kind of read through the thing a second or third time and go through with the line edits and put it all together and whatnot. But there's always a line of like four or five projects stacked up that were already there.

Sabrina: I was going to ask you if you ever get like a tornado projects from your clients.

John: Yes. So everyone always finishes at the same time. I don't know if that's just like the cycles of the moon or something.

Sabrina: We get together...

John: I don't know what happens. But it's true. Writers finish their books all at the same time, and they all hand them in at the same time. I will say, now what I've had, some of my clients have figured out how to hack this system, which is that they'll ask me ahead of time, when would be a good time to send this book? When are you free next? And so I'll look at the schedule and say, like, well, I should be done with my current reading list with nothing else ahead of you at this date. Right. And they're like, Great. And they'll send it that day to reserve their place in line and so they can get a speedy read, which is, again, that's totally fine. They're reserved, they've got their spots. So eah, it depends, but I try to be pretty communicative and available. I never want my authors to be sitting back and like, what's going on? Where's my agent? Is this working? That kind of stuff.

Sabrina: It's scary.

John: Yeah.

Sabrina: Especially when you have a lot of questions and you don't know what's going on.

John: I think that there's a real fear and I understand where it comes from, of like, is so and so avoiding me or not responding to me because they've lost interest in my work or because they no longer want to be my agent or what not. I think in all businesses, in all walks of life, there are people that avoid difficult conversations sometimes. I understand where that fear comes from. But honestly, I think in my experience and the experience of the other agents that I work with, agents just have a million things going on all the time and it just takes time sometimes to respond or to get back. But usually if we're ready to fire a client, that's not something we need to wait on. Like, if there's a problem, if your agent isn't happy with you, you're going to know, I think. You know what I mean? So for better or worse.

Sabrina: I hope so.

John: Yeah.

Sabrina: Oh, man. This just took a dark turn.

John: I know. I didn't mean it to be that dark.

Sabrina: It's okay. It's okay. What are reasons... Is this an ok question to ask? What are reasons that you would fire a client for?

Sure. Well, I think that there's a number of reasons that an agent and a client might part ways, and they're not all gloom and doom. I'll say that a not insignificant number of queries that I receive are from authors who have had other agents before me. I would say maybe almost a third of my clients had agents before me. So having multiple agents or having lost an agent or fired an agent isn't the taboo or the black mark that I think some have felt it is in the past. Maybe that it was in the past. Because agents leave the business, agents sometimes choose to focus on different markets and genres, which might mean that, like, hey, your next YA book. Your agent wants to do more adult stuff. It's not going to work out in that capacity. These days, agencies fold and just go away, god knows. So knock on wood. [knocks] So there's a lot of reasons you can part ways with your agent. I'll say on the agent

side, some of the reasons that I might want to part ways with an author, I think the big one that writer would want to know about is like, at what point do you part ways with an author? Things that aren't selling or aren't going well. And for me, it's always a question of trying to sell new titles and how is that going? So if I've had some authors that started at big houses with big advances and moved to smaller houses with small advances, I've had authors that have taken a completely different trajectory. So careers are always kind of moving around, right? But if I, let's say, have not been able to sell, like, three of your manuscripts in a row, no one's bought them. We haven't been able to get an offer that we wanted. I would say at that point, both of us, me and the author, should be like, something's not working here. The alchemy of you and me is not leading to success, and something should change. You know what I mean? We should probably try something different. You as the author should probably try something different.

Sabrina: That makes sense.

John: And I think that's really reasonable. I think if your agent hasn't been able to sell two or three books of yours, that's something worth examining, I think. But it does happen that the first title doesn't sell and you can move on to a second one. I mean, that's not so big of a deal, but I think if that happens over and over again, then things start to get a little tougher. I've fired clients for saying unconscionable stuff online where I'm just like, I don't want to work with you. Do you know what I mean? As a person, I don't agree with your philosophy and how you treat people.

Sabrina: Don't be a total dick?

John: Don't be in jerk. But that's like any business, right? Yeah, I don't think there's a lot of trapdoors. I would say that where I have noticed conflicts arise between authors and their agents can be when the agent hasn't been communicating and when simultaneously the author starts to make a lot of assumptions about what that means. Like, I've had authors, and I've heard this from other agents, where an author will really build up a big

head of steam because they assume that because an agent isn't responding, all these things must be happening and they can't trust this person, and it's because of this or that reason. And they'll write this super angry email. They've convinced themselves that all these things are true in their head. And then the agent is like, I was in a car accident, or like, my mom died. I haven't been on email because of this very legitimate reason. Or like, hey, listen, I'm coming to you with great news today. Sorry it took the editor this long to get back to me, but what is all this anger? You know what I mean? Where's this coming from? So my advice is always to communicate, communicate, communicate. If you're concerned, start from the point of view that wait to hear their side. You know what I mean? Like, if you're like, hey, this doesn't seem great, let me tell my agent this doesn't seem great because you tell me what's going on here and wait to hear what they have to say. And I would say the same thing is true on the agent side, you know what I mean? If there was a dust up or a squabble or some kind of, like, issue with your editor and whatnot, I always go to the author like, hey, what's going on here? What is it that you're really trying to achieve? Or what is the big concern here? Truly. So talk it through. Do not assume and find out firsthand if that agent is really as dysfunctional or deficient in the way you think. Verify before you go firing somebody or go haul off on somebody because it's a small business and people talk, you know what I mean?

Sabrina: Yeah.

John: I have had an author query me where I spoke to their agent and their agent said I fired them for really bad behavior and here's why I didn't want to work with them. But everybody's different. Agents are people. We're mostly pretty reasonable humans. So I think just talk, communicate your questions and your concerns and your expectations, and usually you can resolve most issues without having to burn a bridge.

Sabrina: Yes, okay, that's all great advice. Always communicate.

Always communicate and remember that it's okay to part ways with an agent. It's not necessarily the end of the world. It might be a kind of graduation, really. It might be that you're ready for a different approach to your work. Or the next phase of your career or whatever it is. So, yeah.

Sabrina: I'm just sitting here going, oh, yes, nodding along over here. No, totally with you on all this. The communication is so important.

John: I'll say, too. And maybe this is something that goes in, maybe it doesn't. But right now, as an agent, my time is super limited. My day is packed with my current client stuff. So that's why I'm so selective about bringing on new stuff. Other agents who are maybe just starting out in agenting, or maybe not just starting out, but newer agents could have more room on their list and can have more space in their head to edit and dedicate to an author. Either an author who has a multiplatform career and needs someone to kind of have a top down look at everything and spend a lot of time figuring out, okay, this is what you should do next. This is what you should do with your merchandising or whatever, or just to spend time on a book that needs a little bit more TLC than a currently busier agent necessarily had. So sometimes it's about transitioning from agents that have a different communication style. Sometimes it's transitioning to someone who is hungrier. Who has more space for you.

Sabrina: That's legit. Yes. I love all of that. When you request a manuscript, when do you stop reading? Do you ever stop reading?

John: Oh, sure, yeah. I mean, most of the time.
[both laugh]

Sabrina: Okay.

John: It's the truth. Well, because I request a manuscript, most of those don't turn into offers. There's still another kind of threshold there. I would say maybe one in 20, again somewhat arbitrary, but maybe one in 20 requested manuscripts actually turn into an

offer of representation. When do I stop reading? I think that your first act should do a few things that are fairly standard in most stories, especially if you're talking about either adventure stories for teens or adventure stories for kids. And they should be pacey. They should engage me with the characters main conflict. I should be engaged with the character as a person and like them. If those things start to veer off, say, in the first 30 pages or first 50 pages, that's usually when I'm stopping by. If I'm going to stop, it's usually within the first 100 pages. And I think that's true of editors as well. I think both agents and editors kind of make up our minds, in a sense, on the first 100 pages. It's like we fall in love or we don't, or we buy into what you're selling, or we haven't, like, you convinced us, or you haven't sometimes in the first 100 pages, and then after that 100 pages, if I see a problem, I'm much more likely to be like, that's okay, we can fix that.

Sabrina: I mean, there are published books that I'll put down after, like, 100 pages sometimes just because just for whatever reason...I'm not going to say which ones. [both laugh]

John: Oh, yeah. Well, I would say I have a terrible attention span, which is great for an agent, because I need to represent the most difficult to capture reader. And I do.

Sabrina: It's yourself, yes, you're perfect.

John: It's me. Yeah, it's true. So usually when I stop reading it's because the book has not kicked off into its main adventure or plotline in a way that feels really compelling and satisfying. The storytelling has lost me. Even if the line level writing has stayed consistently good.

Sabrina: Does the line level writing fall off a lot, too, or no?

John: Yeah, maybe. I think there is a bit of truth to that, maybe more so than the first 30 pages. I noticed it was the first 10 pages. Once I get to the material that you wouldn't see in the query. So, like, most agents ask for more or less the same amount of material when you query, right? Is it usually like ten pages?

Sabrina: Sometimes. Sometimes. It can vary between... I'm telling you, it's like between five pages and 50 pages. And sometimes it's a word document, and sometimes it's pasted, and sometimes it's a form, and sometimes it's an email. It's always different. And sometimes they want a synopsis, and sometimes they want, like, a separate bio. It's really fun out there right now.

John: Man, I'm sorry.

Sabrina: It's okay. So back on queries. Do personalizations matter to you and how much?

John: So, they do a little bit. I think if you can find an organic personalization to include in your query, you should. By organic, I mean you've read an interview with this agent, you know that they're looking for this particular thing because you looked on their manuscript wishlist page or whatnot. That's fine. I think you want to avoid really reaching for one. Like, if you don't have one, you can't find one. You don't want to make one up, or you don't want to say, I know that you're looking for this kind of thing when I'm not. [small chuckle] So personalizations, I think are nice if you can do them, but they're not a requirement, and it's not like I'm going to be offended or not interested if there's no personalization. One thing that I do think makes a significant enough difference, though, is using the agent's name. So dear Mr. Cusick or Dear John.

Sabrina: Do you really get that many without a name on there?

John: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

Sabrina: My blanket is at least 'dear awesome agent,' so at least there's a little... and then you go fill in the name, but it's really not... put the names in. Be nice. We do get ghosted a lot and we get a lot of Dear Author rejections on this end. [laughs]

John: I'll be the first to tell you the power imbalance is not fair and it's on the agent side.

Sabrina: It's so not fair.

John: I know it's the truth. It is the truth, but yeah, I think if you can just get the agent's name in there, that's enough. I also say too, if you're copying and pasting a lot of stuff, like you're pasting in your pitch and then you're going to put the agent's name on top, do the thing where you select the whole email and put it in a font.

Sabrina: Does yours change the font size?

John: So it doesn't happen a lot, and again, it isn't a deal breaker, but it's not a great look when it's like **DEAR JOHN** [voice emphasis to seem REALLY BIG, and Sabrina laughed] and then this tiny little thing that's the pitch and then they clearly wrote their bio separately because it's like in a different font and then you know what I mean?

Sabrina: I've noticed that a few times with some emails I sent to people and I'm just like, oh, that looks *so* good. [sarcastic]

John: I wouldn't want any of your listeners to freak out. It's not a deal breaker, it's not an embarrassing thing to happen or whatnot, but just like an extra. This is like putting the plastic cover on your book report.

Sabrina: It's just the shine. Put a little shine on it.

John: It's the shine.

Sabrina: Put the name on there.

John: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Sabrina: Do the whole thing together. I'll do the same thing. I have a really bad habit. I have to read everything 40 times when I do stuff and then I have to go fix it over here and then I'm like wait wait wait, copy and paste it because it's going to look different. Like the one word, and. Yeah.

John: Yeah, I'll make a million excuses for it. Like my vision is bad and I'm number Dyslexic and all this stuff, all of which is true. However, I am the king of typos. I live in fear of sending out emails with mistakes in them and I'll reread them a million times.

Sabrina: Yup. Me too. Me too.

John: And still...any option to have like a delayed send when you hit send and then you can stop it from going 10 seconds later. I have that on every app that I own.

Sabrina: I love it.

John: I don't know what's wrong with me, but I will say I'm very sympathetic in that case to typos. So when people spell my last name wrong or they make a silly mistake, I'm always like 'friend, it's okay, it happens, it happens.' That's why we have copy editors.

Sabrina: Yes. I wish I had a copy editor that just would follow me around to fix all my stuff though. Like all my personal stuff.

John: Yeah, me too.
[both laugh]

Sabrina: Do you always read sample pages and a query together or do you ever like...not?

John: It's not uncommon for me to know from the query that it's a pass I mean, put aside the dozens of queries I get that are for the wrong market or just really aren't for me and are kind of almost sent to me mistakenly. Like. Not understanding my area or whatnot you put those aside. I will say a lot of queries are pitches for things that, as they are pitched, sound too much like everything else, or there's nothing in them that sounds distinct.

Sabrina: Very vague.

John: Right. Like, I might read a YA query about a character who grows up in a dystopian future and she runs away from her town and meets up with a guy who's part of the resistance, and together they'll have to overthrow this horrible government. Now, you could say, well, what other book is that? And I would say, but isn't it basically kind of every book? Where is the unique thing that would make the editor go, oh, really? Where is the surprise? Where's the unique detail? So if I read that query, I'm probably not going to read those sample pages, because I'll say that the best sentence in the world isn't going to save a boring story, particularly in YA and middle grade, because that readership, they absolutely can and do appreciate a beautiful sentence, a beautiful metaphor, a theme, but they read to find out what happens next. Right? Like, is this story compelling? And actually, that's one of the reasons why I stayed in Kidlit when I got there, is because it is writer boot camp. You must be able to tell a good story about compelling characters. You cannot hide behind your beautiful pros.

Sabrina: Your pretty sentences.

John: Yeah, exactly. No hiding behind your elaborate metaphors for industrialism. Is it a good story? Do we care? And I think that's really all that matters.

Sabrina: Yeah, that's fair. Okay, so what are your favorite writing tips and querying advice? Other than including the name?

John: Yeah yeah. So for query tips, I would say if you're not doing this already, make yourself a spreadsheet. There are so many agents that I would suggest submitting in heats of five to ten at a time and waiting a certain predetermined period of time for you to add more agents to that list. The reason you do this is because if everyone has similar feedback, it gives you the opportunity to revise before going out to more people, which is very important. I would say become an expert in your market. That's my advice. This is really what's going to make the difference. I was going to go into all this crafty stuff, but honestly, we can talk till we're blue in the face about how to write better stories, which is

essential. But what you should take away from this, oh listening reader, is that if you want to be a published YA author, why aren't you an expert in the YA market? Like, why not? You should be. Who's publishing what? Who are the big names out there? What are their covers look like? What do their titles look like? I have a reputation of being good at titles at my agency, and one of the things that I'll do all the time, or I used to do, is like, go and stand in front of the shelves at Barnes Noble and just be like, what's the vibe of the titles today? Like, just lots of single words, lots of sentences, lots of we were this, they were always that, when we were... [laughs] Someone tweeted something that 'every adult book is called All the Tiniest Things We Didn't Know Were Small. And like, every YA book is like The Bone of Daughter and Blood and Bone.' You know what I mean? There are trends, right? So go absorb that stuff and get a sense of the kinds of books that are very popular right now and that will influence the work that you're focusing on and how you approach it. The only reason I, as an author, got a YA novel published is because I was working at a literary agency, and I got this amazing graduate-style education in how do you put together a book that people want to buy and that people want to read? And that's very different from how do you write the great American novel? Or how do you write the great Russian novel? Right?

Sabrina: Or Russian. Yes. [laugh]

John: Right. So this is a tangent. I forgot completely where we started on that, so I'll just stop there.

Sabrina: We started on querying tips and you said to be big in the... know the market and yeah, and I'm going to piggyback on that. Read read read read all the books. I need to post more about the books that I love because I read all the books and then I never tell anybody that I love them. [both laugh]

John: Well, and you know what? I'll tell you this. I don't have a lot of time to read everything that's out there. So what I'll do as an agent is I will download digital samples, which you can do on Amazon, if that's your E-reader, Sony, if that's your reader or

whatever. You get the digital sample of the first 15 pages or what have you, like every big YA book that's out there right now. Anything that's on the most anticipated list, anything that E says it's the best YA, it's on the BuzzFeed list. I'll download those samples and I'll read them all. I'll sit down for like 2 hours at a stretch and just read the openings of every YA being published that season. And if it's something that really grabs me personally, I'll read the whole thing. And if it's a very big book, I'll read the whole thing. But that's the way that I can get kind of like a snapshot picture of, this is what it feels like out there right now. This is what the style, the voices that people are talking about, and this is the kind of thing that's working in different genres and different markets and whatnot.

Sabrina: Okay, let's talk about you specifically and wishlist. So give us a broad scope of what...well, you're closed right now. Do you have any idea when you're going to open again?

John: Later this year.

Sabrina: Okay.

John: I mean, definitely, yeah, before the end of 2022.

Sabrina: You don't have to put an actual date in that for this.

John: I genuinely haven't made up my mind. [both laugh] Definitely I will be closed through the month of August and I may reopen in September or a little bit later in the fall, but almost certainly this year will I be reopening and what am I looking for? So, I represent primarily fiction novels in the categories of middle grade and young adults. With a little bit of crossover into the adult space. I get a lot of submissions of people who want to write kind of in this crossover-y universe, I kind of like Ya, but I kind of want to do adult. That's fine. I look at that stuff. I would say on my wish list, I would love to see a YA fantasy that is not within the aesthetics of medieval times. So, in other words, like swords and sandals, those are great, but I would just love to see why fantasy that takes up different kind of vibes, aesthetics,

world building that feels really different and new. And then on the middle grade side, I love stuff that takes place in our world. So in modern time and place, but with some kind of fantastical elevating element. So the families grandma's cookbook actually contains magical spells. Or When You Reach Me is always my go to fave middle grade comp. It's character driven, but there's surprise spoilers time traveler, you know what I mean? So it's like some elevating thing that makes it a book that makes it something that couldn't happen in real life I think is really fun. I do like genre stuff. I like horror, I like Sci-Fi, and whatnot. I will say, for the most part for YA, I want Sci-Fi that is grounded on our planet rather than sort of star-faring YA. I find that difficult to sell, even though I think it's fun to read. And then finally, I would say on the adult side, I'm looking for genre stuff. So Sci-Fi and a bit of fantasy. This is true across the board BIPOC authors. I feel like that's something that you shouldn't have to point out that you're looking for, but you do, so always looking for more BIPOC authors. And I think I really want to emphasize that in that adult space, I see a lot of BIPOC authors querying me for YA, but I don't see them querying me, and maybe that's just me, but in this space, for that crossover space. And I know those writers are out there, so I would say like, yeah, I want to see that stuff and I know the editors want to see your stuff as well. So write send. We're excited to work with it.

Sabrina: It is really sad that that needs to be stated. And at the same time, when it's not on there, it's noticed.

John: It's so interesting yeah, I mean I remember I was really hesitant to ever tweet explicitly I am looking for we wouldn't have used the term BIPOC in 2010, I don't think, because I thought that it would be gauche and kind of sleazy. All you writers who are of color, come to me. I don't know, it just felt gross. But then I did it and all of these writers... I specifically did it. I remember it was about Muslim voices and all of these writers reached out to me and in their queries they were like thank you so much. I didn't know that you were open to this kind of material and stupid privileged white me. What I realized then is that people don't know and you do need to say it.

Sabrina: You have no idea.

John: And you know, honestly, why should you assume anything good? You know what I mean? Why should you assume that someone's an ally if they're not saying so explicitly? I think it totally makes sense. But to that end, I'll just emphasize I'm really dedicated and focused on continuing to sign on more BIPOC authors and also authors of and writing stories of disability and non-cis creators. I identify as bisexual. And queer stories are just a really big thing that are important to me personally. So I really love working with those stories as well. So yeah, those are the historically very marginalized stories in kidlit that I think we are seeing an expanding space for and I think that we all need.

Sabrina: Yes! Yes, please!

John: One thing I will say that probably should be on the record is that when it comes to being a queer author who may or may not be writing a story that is about queer characters, you do not owe your agent or the publishing industry any information about how you identify in your gender and your sexuality, any of that business.

Sabrina: Yes.

John: So if you do not tell me in your query how you identify, I'm not going to ask. It's not my business. But it is something that you can share if you choose to. You don't owe that information to anybody. I will say if you are a queer author and your story is about queerness. I have a client, Abdi Nazemian and he wrote an amazing book called Like a Love Story that is very much about the AIDS crisis and very much about queer identity. His character's sexuality is not incidental to the story in any capacity. I think I would want that book to be written by a queer man, you know what I mean? So that's why I would want to know. But again, you do not need to. You are under no obligation to out yourself to anybody in order to be published or get agents. I think that's worth saying in the current sort of climate that we're

in YA, which is very positive in certain cases but can also be potentially exploitative or invasive, let's say.

Sabrina: Yeah, no, I remember when we were doing... I mean, it's over now, but when we were doing Pitch Wars, that was one of our biggest things. Like, we wanted, give us all the queer books, but you do not have to tell us if you are queer or not. Don't feel like you have to share anything that you're not comfortable with.

John: Yeah. Yeah.

Sabrina: Okay. Do you want to talk author stuff or do you need to go? Where are you on time?

John: I can go for a few more minutes. Sure.

Sabrina: Are you sure?

John: Yeah yeah yeah.

Sabrina: Okay because I can also let you go, and I'm so sorry I'm taking up your entire day.

John: No, no, it's okay. You're not at all. That's totally fine.

Sabrina: Okay. Okay, so fun stuff. Author questions real quick. What's the hardest revision you've done as an author?

John: Hardest revision I've done. Well, I will say when I was working on my second book, my editor and I went back and forth on it for a really long time, like, past my due date, things were getting pretty dire, and I was really stressed about it. I mean, it was sophomore novel syndrome to the 11th degree, right? And I was really flipping out about it. And eventually I said to my editor. I said, Deb. Can you give me. I forget what it was if it was a month or three weeks or what to rewrite this from scratch. Because I feel like I have learned so much about this story and about writing and about what this needs and what it doesn't in the course of our edit. That if I could just start over, the next version

of this book would be just a million times different. And she was like, yeah, go for it. And I did, and it was very speedy. It took me three weeks maybe. And then I turned it in.

Sabrina: Oh, wow.

John: And she's like, 'Look, I've got maybe one or two tiny tweaks, but this is it. You killed it. You did it.'

Sabrina: Wow.

John: So my advice often to writers...I was just tweeting about this the other day, is if you can stomach it, if you can do it, it is better to rewrite than revise. Like, rewriting it doesn't sound like it, but it is such a lifesaver. Like, in my instance, there was an entire character, a brother character, that was huge in the early draft. I just didn't need he just doesn't exist in the new version. He just never got introduced. I didn't need to find a way to make him work. I just never wrote him. So I always say to my clients, I know it can be a tough pillow as well, but if you can, rewrite because you will come up with something that's a million times better simply from having that kind of unfettered freedom to write whatever you want with the knowledge that you've gained from your earlier draft.

Sabrina: Yeah, I love that. Are you a pantsner or a plotter?

John: I am a plotter. I think I am. Yeah. I would say that with my middle grade series, *Dimension Why*, that was done a little bit more pantsy because every morning I would wake up and I wasn't writing it thinking I was going to get it published. I was just trying to make my then girlfriend, now wife, laugh.

Sabrina: Oh, cute.

John: Yes. We had just moved in together and so I would wake up every morning, have my coffee, and then by the time she got up, I would have, like, ten pages that were just like, a larf just to kind of get her going in the morning.

Sabrina: Cute.

John: But my rule for that book was any tangent or joke or aside I made as I was writing had to come back later in the book and be justified. So if I went on some goofy little thing about this home appliance company in the future, who built this time machine and, like, this gag, that detail had to become relevant. Like, at the end of the book, the home appliance company is the villain or whatever, you know what I mean? It had to be worked in. So that was a really useful tool for going forward, is like, put in whatever you want, but you've got to use it later. Which I think is just true for pantsing in general. Now, though, I plot. And this comes from revising projects and realizing what I need when I'm editing. At a certain point in the pantsing process, as you're drafting, I feel like I'm starting a new chapter, and I kind of know what I want that chapter to do. So before I start writing, I'll sit down and I'll make a list of, like, what has to happen in this chapter, like, what information needs to be conveyed? How do I want the reader to feel? What is kind of the theme of the chapter? What's, like the little plot arc, like, the beginning, middle, and rising action of this chapter that then comes to some kind of mini conclusion? And once I have all that information, I'll step back and I'll think to myself, okay, what is the best way to convey all this? What's the best setting? Is this something to do...Does it make sense to do this in a conversation? Should I have this happen in a more dramatic scenario? What's a good setting that metaphorically works for what's being discussed, so it all becomes very intentional, and I find that gets the best work out of me, when I'm doing everything kind of as deliberately as I possibly can, that everything matters. Everything is there for a reason, and that helps me kind of move forward. I get very nervous when I'm just writing, and I'm like, I just introduced this guy because it sounded right. Like, oh, God, now he's here. He's on the team too, like this loser. What am I going to do with this character? Whereas if I'm more intentional, I don't kind of get myself tied up that way.

Sabrina: Yes, that all make sense. I like that. So are you normally three weeks of a drafter?

John: No.

Sabrina: Is that only on the one?

John: No. The only reason I could write that draft of *Cherry Money Baby* in three weeks was because I had already been working on different drafts of that book for, like, a year and a half. I knew the plot and the story and the characters so well that it was like there was just a million things in my way. Right. Like, it was just, what don't you put in as you're writing? Because that was my problem with that book, is I had managed to get a second book under contract, and I thought I was Shakespeare, and it was just full of all this nonsense, [laughs] that's just really distracting. It had to go. So, yes, normally I am not that fast. I think it'll take me probably...when I'm really writing at speed, I'll do six pages a day. When I'm really at speed. But it takes me a while to build up to that momentum. And I will say, agenting definitely doesn't leave a lot of extra time for writing. And what I'll say it really doesn't do is it doesn't leave a lot of mental space for writing after you've been editing and thinking about books and story all day long. The last thing I want to do at the end of the day is to be like, just to go write.

Sabrina: Think about more books and stories. Yeah, I hear you.

John: Yeah, yeah.

Sabrina: Do you have a routine when you sit down to write, other than getting your pages out?

John: Yeah, so a few things that I do to kind of get myself in the mood, I do try to write at the same time every day, and I have that in my calendar, so I can't book things for that time, whether it be docs appointments or work stuff or whatever, I'm there. That's my time. But I don't expect myself to write every day or even five days a week, every week. Like, I have a schedule that is workable for me. It's the best that I can manage with my day job. Right. But I have a schedule that I try to stick to. I always read or listen to audiobooks immediately before I start writing. It's almost like it

gets my brain going in full sentences. It's like just chatter. I think the way I work as a writer is I just mimic other people and other things, and I recombine it enough that it's not plagiarism, you know what I mean? So if I'm listening to someone that I like and I'm listening to their voice and their cadence, I can just jump in and suddenly I'm going I'm kind of mimicking the sound of full sentences. But the other thing I'll do is I will reread what I wrote the day before. So it's almost like I'll start by editing first. Like I'm tweaking. I'm rereading. I'm thinking, oh, that's good, that's fine. I'm cutting stuff. And then I'll get to where I stopped, and I'll pick up from there. If that is still really hard, what I will do is I'll take the last page or three paragraphs that I wrote, and I will rewrite them. I'll just start typing them over and that, again, just getting into that flow—it's almost physiological more than anything else. Get your fingers moving. Just get them moving. Get words coming out. I once heard someone say, you can't turn a parked car, and I think that's really true. You have to be moving forward.

Sabrina: That's a good one.

John: Isn't that cool?

Sabrina: Yeah. I do. My key gets stuck in my ignition, and it will not turn. It doesn't turn.

John: Can't turn a parked car. So you have to be moving forward to make a decision or to change what you're doing. So for me, that means just getting my fingers moving on the page. It's all about momentum.

Sabrina: Nice. How do you stay organized both with your author stuff and your agenting stuff? Do you have a million spreadsheets over there? [laugh]

John: Yes, there's just not a lot of bulk processing power in my brain. I was going to say I'm not that smart, but I'll just say, I just can't keep it all straight in my head.

Sabrina: I can barely keep this conversation straight, so...
[laughs]

John: It's astounding to me that I only lost track of what the question was once. Usually that's, like, a multi time thing.

Sabrina: Me, too. We're doing really good.

John: Um. So. Oh, my God. And now I have to do it again. You jinxed me!
What was the question?
[both laugh]

Sabrina: How do you stay organized? [more laughing]

John: Oh, my gosh. I didn't make... that was real. That was very legitimate.

Sabrina: That was awesome. I love it.

John: Okay, so how do I stay organized? So I have, like, 20 different Google Sheets going on at once. So I have a Google Sheet for every project that's on submission that has a list of who I sent it to, what date I sent it, when I'm following up, what date they pass, all of that stuff. Folio, also as an agency, has a really robust agent software, basically, that keeps track of... lets me know, hey, there's a payment due on this contractor. Hey, this thing that has a term on it is about to expire. We upload everything into that system, and it helps us keep track of when to follow up on things. I also have a little mini calendar that I use on occasion that's basically the lifecycle of a book. Like, the timing of these things is always different, but there are certain things that every book goes through. Did you get your first round of edits? Did you get your marketing and publicity plan? Or do you know what that is? Have we gotten the cover? Have we gotten blurbs? That I'll kind of use the checklist to be like, what should I be worrying about right now? Where is this book on the list? Because a big part of the agent's job is sometimes just making sure that the publisher keeps doing theirs, that things are moving forward at a pace.

You're often being like, 'hey, that thing, you know, that you're supposed to do, do it faster or do it more on time.

Sabrina: Yeah.

John: So it's your job to kind of keep a macro view of everything. So that's what I'll do for those kinds of things. For writing, obviously it's different. I think a lot of writers like me have a folder that's just stuff that I decided not to put in the book, but I can't bring myself to completely delete. Mine is just called, like, clipped bits, like things I clipped out. Bits I clipped out. But I definitely keep that as an organizing structure. And like I said, I outline a *lot*. The book that I'm working on now, every chapter is a different playing card. So I have the different playing cards on a spreadsheet. Like, okay, this is what happens in this chapter. This is what happens in this chapter.

Sabrina: Oh, that's cute.

John: Yeah. Yeah. So it's difficult to stay organized with so much going on. But I think that every agent has their own different kind of personal systems and at Folio, we also have like a macro shared official system that we all participate in as well.

Sabrina: That's awesome. That makes things easier. I feel like we've done so much. Why don't we wrap up? So do you want to tell us about your books and where we can find you and everything?

John: Yeah, absolutely. So you can find me online at www.johnmcusick.com. So just my name and my middle initial, M as in Michael.

Sabrina: I don't even think I have that.

John: Yeah, it's a website that badly needs updating, but it exists. I would say, for submission guidelines and when I reopen, I will make an announcement on Twitter. So I'm also @johnmcusick on Twitter, and you can always go to www.foliojr.com and I have my official agents page there and I have my complete submission

guidelines. I have my complete taste list and a little bit about me and whatnot. So if you want to query me, it's a good resource. That page will always show whether or not I am currently open to queries or not. So hopefully there's not a lot of guesswork there.

Sabrina: Awesome. Okay. Are there going to be any more Dimension Why books? Can you say that?

John: I will say there is not currently a plan for there to be more Dimension Why books. I'm working on a new middle grade book at the moment. I don't know what's going to happen with it, but we'll see. But I'm definitely writing pretty frequently and at speed, so I'm hoping to have more stuff for people to read very soon.

Sabrina: Yay. And do you have links for all your books up on your website as well?

John: I do, yeah.

Sabrina: Okay, perfect.

John: Yeah you can find those there.

Sabrina: Awesome. Okay. Did you have anything else you want to add or you just like 'get me off of this podcast?' [both laugh]

John: No. Not at all. No, we talked about okay, so currently close to queries, but I'll say for the record, when I'm open, I always ask for an email that includes your query letter and the first ten pages or 2500 words of your manuscript pasted into the body of the email. And please put the word 'Query' in the subject line. That's my only other request. And as I was saying earlier, the things that I'm really looking for right now are novels, so fiction, and that could be graphic novels or prose or novels in-verse. But fiction for middle grade readers, young adult readers and adults in the genre spaces. So horror, fantasy and scifi and whatnot.

Sabrina: Sweet. Thank you. This is so awesome and I think this is a really great interview.

John: You're welcome. It was absolutely a blast. I had a good time.

Sabrina: Good. Yay, awesome. Great to talk to you.

John: Thank you. You too. Bye.

Sabrina: Bye.

[Upbeat music intros and fades]

Sabrina: Okay everyone, that's it for episode one. You can find a book list from our chat and all the John links in the show notes. Thank you so, so much for listening!

Sabrina: Okay, Ginny. Say goodbye.

Ginny: [barks]

[Upbeat music ends]

In this episode:

The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams

Vladimir Nabokov

Robert Asprin

We Hunt the Flame by Hafsah Faizal

When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead

Like a Love Story by Abdi Nazemian

John's books:

Girl Parts

Cherry Money Baby

Dimension Why #1: How to Save the Universe Without Really Trying

Dimension Why #2: Revenge of the Sequel

John's Links:

Agency Website: <https://www.foliojr.com/>

John's Website: <https://johnmcusick.wordpress.com>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/johnmcusick>