

LitTea Episode 10: Kaylie Smith - Part 1

- Sabrina Hey everyone! Welcome to part one of Episode 11 of LitTea! I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and I'm so pleased to be joined today by Kaylie Smith, whose debut young adult novel, *A Ruinous Fate*, comes out tomorrow, January 3rd! This is a fun one y'all, and our longest episode to date, so don't forget to check out part two of our interview when you're done! Okay, let's do this thing!
- Kaylie Hi, everyone. My name is Kaylie Smith. I am a YA fantasy author, and I write just very queer, chaotic fantasy books. I'm super excited to be doing this. I think this is like my first podcast.
- Sabrina Yay.
- Kaylie I've done a couple of interviews, but yeah! This is gonna be my first one when it comes out, so I'm so excited.
- Sabrina Oh my gosh, that's super exciting, and I love queer, chaotic fantasy. I'm super excited to read your book. So, as of recording, I just got the ARC today. By the time this airs, I will have devoured this thing already, but I'm super excited about it. Okay. So I have these really fun little would you rather's, that I don't ever want to answer for anybody. Would you rather read bad writing but an incredible story, or incredible writing but an awful story?
- Kaylie Okay, absolutely bad writing but an incredible story.
- Sabrina Okay.
- Kaylie I think, because bad writing is like, super subjective, right?
- Sabrina It is. That's true.
- Kaylie So it's, like, what's bad to me or anybody else could be really good to somebody. And I feel like craft can always be improved. So, if you have the story ideas, I feel like your execution can always get better and make that really good. So yeah. Also, I was raised on fan fiction. I feel like this is such good stories from just all over the place that maybe people aren't like 'This is literature', but I ate it up in high school. [Laughs.]
- Sabrina I don't remember what site I used. It's been a while since I was in high school. In like - my early 20s. But I remember there were some fan fiction. There's an author - I can't remember the author's name either - but there's a book I think about, every once in a while, that I read on one of those websites, and I'm like, 'I wonder what that looks like now.' And like 'I wonder what they're doing. I wonder if I've read some of their other books that I didn't even know, and connect.'
- Kaylie No. So true. I feel like that has happened to me a few times, actually. I'll pick up an indie book or something from Kindle Unlimited, and I'm like, 'This feels so familiar.' And I'm like, 'I swear I read this back when it was just like, on fanfiction.net.' And I'm like, 'Good for you!'
- Sabrina Yeah.
- Kaylie 'I'm so happy.'
- Sabrina Oh, that's awesome. Okay, if you could only read one, would you rather read the first page, or the last page?
- Kaylie I am a last page person. Yes, I read the last page of every book before I start it. I've always done that.
- Sabrina Oh my gosh, you do it first?
- Kaylie I do.
- Sabrina It's so much chaos. [Laughs.]

Kaylie Yes. And it's like I've always loved it. People fuss at me sometimes, but I love that, which is actually why I intentionally make my last pages, like, the most chaotic page of my books, because I'm like, 'Ooh, I'm on to ya'll, like, last page readers.'

Sabrina That's you! That's awesome. That's hilarious. Okay, that's interesting. Is it just the last page? You don't do like the last chapter or anything?

Kaylie No, I just do the last page.

Sabrina Okay, what if it's real short and it's only like three lines? Do you do like the page, and that line?

Kaylie I'll say I'll just do the very short ones. Yeah, because it happens sometimes. It'll just be like the half of the last sentence, but that's all I give myself, so whatever it is.

Sabrina Okay, that's really cool. Okay, what book made you a reader?

Kaylie Okay, so honestly, *Twilight*. [Laughs.]

Sabrina Yes, okay.

Kaylie It's like one of those things that I think looking back, and the reader, and the person I am now, there's a lot to critique there, and there's a lot of conversations that have come out with the phenomenon of *Twilight*, but it's undeniable. I was in 6th grade and I wasn't like a huge reader. My grandfather always read to me, and *Howl's Moving Castle* was my favorite. So I had read that book probably upwards of like 30 times by that time, but I just wasn't looking to read. Like I didn't really care about it. And then I read *Twilight* and I swear something just unlocked in my mind. It was just like, 'Wait, I can do this.' Like full adventures, like movies playing in my head with books, and I just never stopped after that.

Sabrina Oh, that's awesome.

Kaylie I'll give credit where credit is due. [Laughs.]

Sabrina No, it's really funny. I actually laughed when you said that at the very beginning, because I just recorded my interview with Courtney Kae, and her book was also *Twilight*, and we had a really awesome chat about it. So yeah. [Laughs.]

Kaylie Yeah, there was just something, it was just like massively consumable, you know what I mean?

Sabrina It was, and it unlocked a lot, like a lot of writers' brains as well. I feel like it took Young Adult, as a category, to a different level.

Kaylie Yeah, it was huge in the industry, too, to kind of go from that teen section that they used to have, to having an actual Young Adult section. There were several books that did that, but *Twilight* definitely played a role in that for sure. Yeah, no, for sure.

Sabrina Yeah. So you mentioned three. What breed did you say? You have three dogs?

Kaylie Yes, I do. I have three dogs. They're all Australian Shepherds.

Sabrina Oh, cute. What are their names?

Kaylie So, I have - Sorry, my phone just rang. Our oldest is named Kai, and then we have two girls, and it's Ophelia and Delphine, which you will see in my books. And I am not sorry about that because I think it's so cute every time I open them. Like, 'There's my puppies' names.'

Sabrina They're your babies. Yeah, that's so cute. Oh, that's awesome. Oh, that's really funny. And then what other kind of hobbies and interests do you have, outside of reading and writing?

Kaylie Honestly, napping.

Sabrina Oh, I love napping. [Both laugh.]

Kaylie My partner always likes to say that napping is absolutely like 90% of my personality. He's not wrong. I love napping. I love astrology. And yeah, I don't know. I don't do a ton, which I don't know if that's sad or not, but I love being a homebody, and I like to just read, write my little books, and I'll just do my projects for my day job, because we're graphic designers. So it's kind of like art isn't even really a hobby anymore. It's my job, so I don't know. I'm just chilling.

Sabrina I'm a homebody, too.

Kaylie Yeah, I'm chilling. I feel like my mind is constantly working, like, when it is on, these days, like, creatively, that I'm just like I love just silence.

Sabrina Or doing something where I don't have to think and I can think about something that's already been thought about.

Kaylie Exactly. Yes.

Sabrina I'm a big TV or like, book reader fan. I've gotten really into audio books lately, which is nice because I can just absorb.

Kaylie Yes!

Sabrina And my eyes have done so many words.

Kaylie The fact that my eyesight - how bad it is - is because of reading, It's just so funny. I'm like, 'Well, that's it, right? That's the price you pay, kind of?' [Laughs.]

Sabrina Right. I know. I have, I've been super into audiobooks. It's pretty much been, like, all I do lately.

Kaylie I love that. I had never been, like, an audiobook person until they restarted my audiobook, and I was like, 'Wait, there's something here.'

Sabrina It's cool.

Kaylie And then I've been dipping my - yeah, I've been, like, dipping my toes into it. I have a couple of audiobooks right now. And I'm like, 'I kind of love this. It's very fun.'

Sabrina I'm really excited to hear your audiobook. Okay, cool.

Kaylie Oh, it's gonna be a blast, yeah.

Sabrina Is it multi-voices?

Kaylie It is, yes. When we got started on it, they asked me just for a description of one reader, and I was like, 'Besties, I'm gonna give you some more ideas.' And I've just learned in publishing very quickly that if you just ask for things, they'll probably do it. They haven't told me no yet. Well, I did ask for Zendaya, and they did tell me no to that. [Both laugh.] But, they gave me multiple, they gave me another voice actor for the split POVs, all the boys, and then Calla and her friends. I was like, 'You know what? I'll take it.'

Sabrina Oh, that's super awesome. Okay, cool. I'm so looking forward to that. Okay, I'm gonna read the ARC, and then I'll do the audiobook, when it releases.

Kaylie Yes.

Sabrina Are they releasing the same day?

Kaylie You know what? I don't know. Sometimes I just don't find out things. Like, I will get the sweetest messages from followers on Twitter going, 'Oh, my God, did you see your book is here, or here, or whatever?' And I'm like, 'Oh my God, thanks for sending it to me. Nobody told me.' Yeah, so not sure yet.

Sabrina I feel like a lot of people find out things like that. I'm always surprised when people are like, 'My books on sale', and it's usually because a friend saw it or something, or they looked.

Kaylie That happened to me yesterday. Someone texted me and was like, 'Hey, you're book's on sale on Target.com right now.' And I was like, 'Oh, well, that's fun.' I was like, 'Cool, happy buying. I did not know.' So, yeah.

Sabrina Yeah, that's really pretty common, I think. If everybody's so busy, it's hard to get all the info out, I think.

Kaylie Yeah, totally not even blaming my team.

Sabrina Also, probably that might even be like a Target decision.

Kaylie Right!

Sabrina Is Target gonna email the publisher to email you? I don't know.

Kaylie It's absolutely like an entity thing sometimes too. And then also, I totally don't blame any of that stuff on my team. I cannot imagine having to send every author in their roster, like every single thing that they're doing all the time. But I do think it's so funny because it's like a jump scare, like when I'm searching for things or whatever, and my book pops up like in a random ad, and I'm like, 'Oh, that's there. Yeah, we were doing this placement here.' But that's fun. Like, 'Great. Good job, guys.'

Sabrina Oh, my gosh. Okay, where are we? Oh, okay. Aesthetics. Do you want to talk about aesthetics?

Kaylie Yeah.

Sabrina Oh, I'm so excited.

Kaylie Yeah, I was gonna say I'm totally an aesthetic person for anyone who follows me, especially on Instagram. I have a background in graphic design. I graduated college with a fine arts degree, and I actually was a creative writing major first. But MFA programs, for anyone who knows anything about them, can be kind of tricky. And I just really didn't like the vibe. So I was like, 'Let's just do a job, that maybe, I wanted to love writing.' So, maybe my career, to keep me stable, should just be something I like, but it's okay if it's a job to me. So I did graphic design and that just really taught me so much. Everything I do has to be like an aesthetic process now. It's definitely both a visual and written thing for my books. I tweeted - I think you mentioned you might have saw it - my little Mood journals and stuff.

Sabrina Yes, they're so cool.

Kaylie Yeah, I love collages as a medium. And it's so funny because I have done this my whole life. Like, collaging things. Like my grandmother, who has kept every single thing I have ever done, ever. But she's so sweet. But we just have boxes of my stuff from growing up, and collages come up regularly. Like, it's always been my thing. And now everyone's doing like, Mood Boards. They're calling them Mood Boards and stuff now, but it's just definitely like this collage of fact that's come out aesthetically. And I'm like, 'I love this. I'm so glad we're all on the same page.'

Sabrina They're awesome. They're so cool.

Kaylie It's so much fun.

Sabrina I love them so much. So, for anyone who doesn't know what exactly an aesthetic is and why they're helpful, and what's the difference between it and, like, a mood journal?

Kaylie Yeah. Okay. I find aesthetics to be, like, sort of the brand of either the person creating them, or the project you're working on, right? Definitely, I feel like it just kind of all encompasses, not just those mood board pieces, but the atmospheric vibe of the projects I'm working on, or things like that. So when I do the journals, I do one for every single project I write. I literally have so many, but it's just like I'm really trying to visually capture what I want the book to feel like when you're reading. I've been told it might be like some sort of synesthesia, like some sort of branch of that by some people. That's kind of like what they can compare it to. Like, when I read words like, vibe the music, the stuff that's in my head when I'm writing, that all kind of goes hand in hand, and I feel like it is because of my art training, for sure. I was just trained to - whatever piece you're making - there's a certain atmosphere you want surrounding it. So, I feel like that's always what aesthetic is to me, as far as writing goes. My journals are so messy. Not every page is super pretty or anything like that, but I feel like they're all written so vastly differently depending on the project. Like *A Ruinous Fate*. It's very forest, and moody, and this sort of feeling of trying to untangle things. And then I have another project I'm working on, which is - it's a horror romance, and the way that the journals are even written and stuff, the vibes are just completely different because it's just like a different mood.

Sabrina Oh, that's so cool. I'm with you. I love having the music going. Like, I get playlists for each of my projects going. And I have character walls.

Kaylie Yes! I love that.

Sabrina Yes.

Kaylie That's so cool. I love it. Exactly. You get it.

Sabrina Yeah. Oh, I so get it. No, that's why I was like, 'Oh, we have to talk about this.'

Kaylie Yes! I love it so much. It's so much fun. Also, I think it's like every time I find a person who does that too, like the character boards and stuff, I'm like, 'Okay, kindred spirit.' Because I cannot imagine writing a book without it.

Sabrina Do you have any tips for choosing an aesthetic layout, and choosing your photos? And, you also like quotes. I see quotes done really nicely sometimes. Do you have any tips for that?

Kaylie Honestly, when I have something in my head, I love Pinterest so much, because I like that it will lead you into a rabbit hole if you just keep clicking on things. [Laughs.] So I'll literally just put everything in one new Pinterest board, and then I'll go through poems, or just like my favorite places to pull quotes. Lots of Taylor Swift lyrics everywhere, all the time. Or like the quotes that have given me the vibe I'm looking for. Other music and stuff, and then I'll compile it. And I personally will just start cutting things away that I'm like, 'This isn't exactly the vibe I'm going for' until what I have left is exactly what I'm trying to capture. I use a lot of movies and media, too, because I feel like there are certain scenes that just perfectly capture feelings that I'm going for for certain chapters just in the most random places. Literally, I was watching - does anyone know the movie, 'Monte Carlo', with Selena Gomez?

Sabrina I do know that movie, actually. [Laughs.]

Kaylie I love watching, like, really cheesy teen movies.

Sabrina They're fun, yes.

Kaylie Yes! And so I was watching it - back when I was writing a project - and there's this, like, one scene where she has to be like, 'I'm bored, I want to dance.' And she just grabs the love interest and just pulls him. And I'm like how I literally saved that scene grab because I was just like, that elicits a feeling in me that I feel like would be really fun for like a trope or relationship later on. And it's like, the most random place for me to find that, but I'll do that all the time.

Sabrina Oh, that's awesome. I should do that more often. I'm usually so into whatever I'm watching. I don't think to do that, but that's super smart.

Kaylie I wish I could be that way now. I swear my partner complains all the time because I cannot watch media without looking for things now because I'm, like, in the thick of writing all the time. But it used to not be like that. [Laughs.]

Sabrina I do that too. I usually go with words, so if I see something, I'll usually just go and get my notebook and just go jot it down real quick.

Kaylie Yes.

Sabrina You've gotten some art commissions as well?

Kaylie Yes.

Sabrina Do you have any, like, advice for finding the right artist?

Kaylie I would send, like, I have a PDF form with each page, that has every single thing about every character you could possibly want, including reference images and stuff. And then what happened was, with the art I commissioned, I've had some amazing artists for this project, for my pre-order sales, and it was just a lot of trial and error and learning and getting responses. And I found my favorite, RosalynArts, and I just randomly was going through things, because I swear I need an artist with commissions open. Like, this will be the one that will be like, 'Yes, I'll commission your characters.' And she was just the sweetest human being on the entire planet, and she was so excited about my characters and bringing them to life and stuff. I did a little thing with her just like, character mood boards to kind of like, when I announced the book that I could post to people, and people were so excited about them. They loved her art style so much, and I did too, and working with her was so easy. I was like, 'Okay, this is a partnership. I really want to cultivate this artist,' you know what I mean? Someone who cares about what you're doing, responding. I was like, 'Okay, I'm gonna keep this going.' And so I did a bigger piece with her, and it was just like the best experience. And her style just captured the style that I was going for for my book. And I've been so lucky to work with some really great pre-order artists. Like the art I got, literally, I can't even believe it. It's so pretty.

Sabrina It's so pretty. Your characters just all come alive on the little cards and yeah, they're so pretty.

Kaylie I appreciate it. I'm so excited about them. Thank you.

Sabrina It's really cool because your cover is gorgeous, but it's really cool to see.

Kaylie Thank you.

Sabrina The other characters that are in your novel as well, beforehand. Yeah, that's super awesome.

Kaylie Yeah, I know. Especially because it's like an ensemble cast and stuff. I mean, Calla, over the years of writing the book definitely became, like, the pivotal character. I feel like every book definitely has one, even if it's an ensemble. But it's like, so nice to see the others shine because they're equally as part of the overall story of the series. So I'm just like, 'Yes, everyone appreciate all of my children.'

Sabrina I love that. You actually just jumped right on into ensemble cast. Do you want to do it? Do you want to do it?

Kaylie Yes.

Sabrina Okay. Do you want to - for anyone who doesn't know - tell everyone what that means?

Kaylie Yeah. So to me, ensemble cast means that you have at least three characters that have equal stakes and plot motivation as all the rest that's carrying a story. So mine has eight.

Sabrina Oh, wow. Do you have eight point of views as well?

Kaylie Yes, but some. It's so funny when you read the book. The book is in third person. I love a third person ensemble. I feel like it's so much easier, both as a writer and a reader, to keep track of what's going on. But some have more than others, especially in this first one, and they each kind of pick up more and more as the series goes on. So for *A Ruinous Fate*, Calla definitely is like the pivotal character, like I mentioned, so she has the most her, and...

Sabrina That makes sense.

Kaylie Yeah. But then as you go on, there are snippets and pieces from each character. So it's definitely going to be kind of an equal playing field by the time we get to the latter half of the series and stuff, which is really exciting for me because I love them all so much. And it never gets boring that way.

Sabrina Yeah, that's super exciting. I've seen a few that I really loved that had a lot of characters, like a surprising number of characters. But yes, some of them, they do. Their point of view isn't necessarily interspersed. It's not like, here's these eight, and then here's these eight, and then here's these eight, and then here's these eight throughout. What are some of your favorite other books with ensemble casts?

Kaylie Okay. I love the *Raven Cycle* a lot. I consider that an ensemble cast just because I think every single one of those characters has equal stakes in the books. Even though the pivotal character would be, like, Blue or Gansy, right? I would still consider that an ensemble, which is so much fun because I feel like everyone's definition is slightly different. Not even that, but the way they utilize it is slightly different. Like, *Six of Crows* is super popular, and I think that is, like, a great example of something that's definitely opened up that ensemble cast for the genre and stuff and kind of made it, like, repopular a little bit. So yeah, definitely. I love Inej so much. Also, I would say, like, *Ember in the Ashes*, like books like that. Incredible fantasy series. Epic. I say even that has, like, a little bit of an ensemble element, too, because there's four characters I can think of that really have important stakes in that series and stuff, and I love that.

Sabrina Yeah, those are all really good examples. I cannot. What is the one I'm thinking of? When you were talking about eight.

Kaylie I was about to say, is it like?

Sabrina It's a big series. What is it called? I think it's probably *Falling Kingdoms*, maybe?

Kaylie Oh, yes. Great. You know what?

Sabrina Morgan Rhodes. I think there's six books which help with the huge cast.

Kaylie No, you're so right. Actually, my best friend Elba loves those books, and she's actually the reason I read them.

Sabrina I'm obsessed with them. I want to reread them, but I just haven't had the time.

Kaylie Yes, that is a phenomenal example of an ensemble cast, too. Exactly. And I feel like it's always prevalent and fancy. I feel like all of them have kind of kept that going on, and I was just like, 'I want more.' I love the idea that there's someone for everyone to identify with, especially because growing up, I might get, like, a sliver of a character that shared my identity or life experience and stuff. So I feel like when you give people such a robust cast, it's like, 'Okay, there's someone, like, for everybody' or you hope there would be.

Sabrina Yeah. You're definitely a lot closer than just having one character.

Kaylie Right. I love that.

Sabrina Oh, that's so awesome. Okay, what are some challenges that you've faced writing an ensemble cast? I mean, it is a lot of people to juggle.

Kaylie Yeah. So first of all, the fact that none of them want to do what I want them to do, it's sort of like finding there's, like, a couple, finding the root of why they're all together, why they work together. Like, the chemistry between all of them, whether it's good or bad. I feel like chemistry has to be there no matter what the relationship or how the characters feel about each other. And then also just making sure each of them definitely feels like an individual in the whole picture, because you definitely don't want to keep writing the same archetype, or the same character, with a different name, or different appearance. So making sure that each person really felt like their own person, they had their own background, and their own wants, and the goals. Not all of my characters have the same goals, or even want the same future as each other, but they're kind of brought together by extenuating circumstances, or their relationships with other characters. But it's a mess, to be honest. But I love that. [Both laugh.] There's nothing I love more than like a messy book if I'm being so honest. But yeah, so it's definitely just that. Making sure they're individuals and then also making sure each of them have chemistry with each other. Like even characters that hate each other have chemistry, you know?

Sabrina I love when characters come together and they shape each other's lives, and then sometimes they continue on together, and sometimes they part ways, and it's all good. But yeah, I love all that.

Kaylie Yes, 1000%. I'm a big proponent of: some people are supposed to be in your lives for a certain amount of time, not all the time. Or people. Like, friends are seasonal sometimes, and I don't think that makes them any less important in shaping who you are or like your entire life's journey. They're still a very important person, but they're just not meant to be there forever or anything like that. So I love that an ensemble cast allows you to explore that too, because with smaller casts, I can't get rid of everybody, or not everyone can separate or split up because then who's left?

Sabrina There's nobody there.

Kaylie Yeah. [Both laugh.]

Sabrina Oh, that's funny. Do you have any tips or tricks in terms of making sure everybody gets the attention that they need? And I feel like balance, especially when you have some that have more scene time, and some of them that have less scene time, how do you go about finding the balance that makes the most sense?

Kaylie It's really like the beats of the book that I'm currently writing, because not necessarily everyone will get the same amount of scene time, but you definitely want to make sure they're all developed the same amount, right? So I will just say, for me, when I was writing *A Ruinous Fate*, what I did was actually Calla and Ezra, who are two of the love interests. They start out having a history, like having a background together when the book opens, like, very first scene. And so when, if Ezra, like, Calla has more scene time with Gideon or other characters, it's okay because I wanted to establish like, they already had their growth together, or like the first part of their growth together. So it's like I can focus a little less, maybe, on their relationship and the reader will still get the hint, so I can focus on developing new characters in her life. And I kind of do that with everybody. Caspian and Kestrel and Gideon have this very robust history and background together. And I introduced that way, like, the language that they use together, the familiarity that's on the page. That way, when Kestrel and Caspian don't get as much scene time in this first book as they will in the rest of the series, they feel just as developed as Hannah and Delphine and Calla's friendship, who you see a lot more on page, right? Yeah, it's just like hidden beats like that. Like give and take. Like, if I know, like, Kestrel is only gonna get one POV chapter in this book, I'm gonna make sure, when other characters are talking about him or when he's introduced, the familiarity is really established.

Sabrina That makes a lot of sense. I love establishing history before you get to the - You have a lot of work to do when characters first meet each other, as far as any kind of building anything, there's so much work to do. Yeah.

Kaylie Yes. 1000%. Oh my gosh. They're absolutely examples. You're never the first to do anything, but there's not a ton of exes or people with past relationships and stuff. Like when a book opens, a lot of books are meeting. And I love those books too, but I love the drama of having exes and someone that they already know each other. And then I also like meeting the love interest for the first time moments. So I was like, 'I'm just gonna give everyone both of those things.'

Sabrina I love it. I'm so excited. Yay. Okay. That sounds so fun. You want to do some querying questions?

Kaylie Sure. Yes.

Sabrina Okay. So you have really good stats on your website, but one thing I noticed is that you had written a couple of different books, and then you waited, and this was the first book that you queried. There's a lot of discipline in that, which is awesome, and there's a lot of growth in that, too. So how did you know this is the book you wanted to query? That this was the one that you were gonna pursue? And also, what kind of things did you learn working on the other books and, like, what kind of projects, like, led you to *A Ruinous Fate* before you decided to pursue it?

Kaylie Yeah. Okay. So this is, and I apologize, a couple partner, like, of a question. Also, I think my dogs are barking. I am so sorry.

Sabrina I think they are. But it's fine. They're cute. Hi, puppies!

[Dogs barking.]

Kaylie They love to sing. I am so sorry. I think my partner might have just gotten home because I can just hear them. Okay, we're good? Okay. Yeah. So this question has a couple of parts. There's several things about me as a person, and then also just the project itself. And it's so - I just want to say - so circumstantial, for every single person, of knowing when you're ready. There's no right way to write a book. There's no right way to query or get into this industry, to be totally honest. Sometimes you just got to claw your way in because it's a very harsh industry...

Sabrina Just keep clawing.

Kaylie ...and yeah, there's a lot of things that play into that. The first being I'm OCD, for a little bit of background. I've lived with pretty severe OCD since I was, like, six. And one of my things is that I cannot do anything if I think I'm going to fail at it. It's, like, constantly on my mind. I will absolutely run myself into the ground, like, perfecting a project or anything I do, which is not healthy. But unfortunately did play a little bit of a role in when I knew I was gonna query, because other books that I had written, this has been definitely the longest project I've worked on. The original entity that *A Ruinous Fate* was, started when I was, like, 16.

Sabrina Oh, wow.

Kaylie Yeah. I've come back to these characters over and over again throughout the years, but their plot was never right. The thing that held the plot together has changed so much, so many times over the years. And I had written other projects, and I think I always knew at the end of all those projects that my craft was still not there, which is something I kind of learned from being an artist. Every piece that you make is integral to being the artist you're gonna become, but isn't necessarily like, your destination or what you want to put out. And I knew that, like, my craft on those books were just not good. And I just kept revisiting these other characters. And I think ultimately what happened was Covid happened. And I had a lot of time to myself, as many of us did, and I sat in my house and something happened that gave me inspiration for the plot. And I was like, 'I don't think anyone's really ever done this before.' Like magic dice that decide your fate. We're big board game people.

Sabrina Yeah, that's really cool.

Kaylie Yeah. I was like, I don't believe that specific point was, like, something I had seen. And finally the plot came together for these characters that I've been wanting. And I was like, this is a representation of every facet of my personality, like this book. And I was like, 'This is what I want people to get to know me as.' Because I think, as authors and artists, you don't get to choose your magnum opus. I think the consumers of whatever you're creating ultimately get to decide that for you. But what I can choose is how I introduce myself to the world. And I really had always felt I knew - going back to these characters - Calla's journey, the reason I could never fully write it is because I wasn't done growing. I hadn't finished getting through what she goes through in the book myself yet. And when I finally went through that as a person, it finally all came together. And I was like, 'This is what I want people to see me as first.' Yeah, it's like, even if it's not my magnum opus or the most successful thing I ever do, I was like, 'This is my true introduction, I think.' So I knew then, I was like, 'This is the book I want to query.' I always went back to it, and I knew my craft was finally at a place that I was like, 'I could get an agent with this.' The ones before that, I was like, 'Just beat it.' I was like, 'No, it's not there. Scrap it. Throw it away. Just keep going.' And it's not that I won't even revisit those ideas. I never believed books were shelved forever. But, I think I made the right decision. I think my instincts obviously did lead me.

Sabrina I mean, it seemed to work out pretty well, so.

Kaylie Yeah. So it's kind of like one of those things that it's like having the disorder that I have, I wouldn't wish it on anybody or necessarily. Sometimes I don't handle it very well, but also it's me. It's a very integral part of my brain and how I think. And it's definitely the reason that the process worked for me the way that it did. Highs and lows. So it's like, 'We're here, we're doing it.'

Sabrina So you've been working on this project for a while and obviously revising it throughout. Once you signed with your agent, what kind of revisions did you end up doing before you went on submission?

Kaylie So my agent, she's incredible. She didn't have a ton of things for me. I think a big reason she did pick this book is probably because I edited it to death before I queried. And so she was like, 'This is like almost submission ready.' Honestly, the biggest thing we revised was a relationship point. There's a very pivotal point between - because I always say, like, to me, the series is gonna end up being romantasy adventure. Like, yeah. I am a big proponent of equal fantasy and romance. The kind of writer and reader I am. It is. And the way the characters developed, it had to be perfect to get across the overarching themes and what happens to the characters. And there was this one very pivotal scene between Calla and Ezra, actually, and she was like, 'We need to make this absolutely just so strong, like this one point in the book.' And so she sent me all of her notes, and I edited for about two weeks, specifically that.

Sabrina For this one scene? That's amazing.

Kaylie This one scene. And I was, like, really built it out. And I think that's a big part of what sold the book, in the end, because that relationship between Calla and Ezra affects every other relationship that she has in the book. And it's still one of my favorite little moments. And things still changed with my editor. But yeah, I would say that's probably really the only big thing. And the thing is, it's different for everyone. I know people who their agents were like, 'Oh, this is sub ready now.' And they just went on sub and they got book deals. I know people who edited their books before going on sub for literal months, years.

Sabrina A lot. Yeah.

Kaylie And they did. And those were success stories, too. But I think every manuscript is in a different place. And also my advice is always ask the agent, 'Are you signing me on for my ideas and the bones of the story? Or because you think this book is ready to sell immediately?' And neither answer is wrong. It's just like they're different.

Sabrina And it depends on what kind of revisions go into it, what kind of time you're looking at.

Kaylie Yeah.

Sabrina A lot of that deals with your vision for it, too, and especially if they want a lot bigger changes. Are you ready for those? And do you want them?

- Kaylie Exactly. Especially multiple offers situation, right. Like some agents, it's always a good question to ask because some agents are very vision oriented and like, your overarching career and your future projects as well. Not just that current one. And some agents are very editorial and they want this specific project right now, and see where you go together. And I just think, yeah, everyone's preferences are different for that.
- Sabrina Yeah. And every author is gonna - you know, some authors are gonna work really well with one type. Some authors are gonna work really well with another type. Yeah.
- Kaylie Uh huh. 1000%.
- Sabrina So you got a lot of bites when you were querying. You got a good request rate both from querying, and you got some pitch requests as well from some Twitter pitch events. So do you have any tips for making your query letter stand out and your first pages? Because I feel like a lot of querying submissions with agents usually involve some pages.
- Kaylie Yeah, both of those elements are super important. So I always give a disclaimer about my querying journey because it's definitely an anomaly. It was very, very fast, and it was a mixture of things.
- Sabrina It was, but it wasn't your first book either.
- Kaylie No, it wasn't. Yeah. Going back into that perfecting this book to know, because I don't think I'm the kind of person who could have handled being in the querying trenches for that long. I wouldn't even call it giving up. I would have just been like, 'This isn't for me right now.' And I would have moved on to something else, because I love to constantly be working on stuff. So I knew, I was like, 'If I'm gonna do this, it's gonna have to work, or it just isn't this season of my life.' And it's - that's a different journey for everybody, right? Like, it's a very, very personal journey. So I was like, 'Okay, I want this to go so well.' So I definitely like, kind of put my best foot forward. I researched querying, first of all, since I was like 13. I found, okay, because I read *City of Bones* back in the day. And the author, Cassandra Clare, used to have this page on her website that I had bookmarked on every computer in my household. And I would just open it and it was 'How to Get a Book Published'. Because it's like, 'I'm going to do this someday. Don't know when, but it's gonna happen.'
- Sabrina This is so amazing.
- Kaylie So, I've been knowing about querying forever. And then when I was like, 'Okay, we're gonna query this book', I did just an absolute wild amount of research. I watched every single YouTube video available to me. I looked up sample queries. I was reading blogs and blogs about people's stats. I had Excel spreadsheets. And the thing is, this is not what made me successful. It just, I feel like, made me prepared for what I was getting myself into. My query letter could have still been bad. If you don't do all that research, that doesn't mean you're not gonna get an agent. It's just like how I worked. So I was like, 'Okay, I did my due diligence. Let me get to this part.' And really, what made my query stand out, I think, is I am very good at pitches. And I focused mostly on my stakes of my book. And then my sample pages were very strong. Every single query I sent out was incredibly customized to that agent. I spent a lot of time and I think that's also why I got a lot of bites. Because every agent's manuscript wishlist I would pull two things from it and what they were asking for. And whatever two elements they were looking for, I would directly extract something from my own book and be like, 'I saw that you liked blank and blank. My book has blank and blank'. Every single query letter. And so I know I was taking it directly from their own mouth and relating it to my story. I also never queried agents that had anything similar to me, which is a very hard thing to do for a lot of people.
- Sabrina That is hard.

Kaylie So I want to say that definitely comes from a position of privilege and stuff, like in some cases. And if they had queer things in their list, it's not that I wouldn't query my book. Like, I absolutely queried plenty of agents that had other queer stories and stuff. I just made sure my stakes were different from the stakes. So if they had certain books that was really about coming into their queer identity, my book doesn't do that. Everyone's established very queer on page, from the get go. So I was like, 'Okay, I'll go into that lean,' because everyone always told me publishing is so competitive. No one wants the same book twice, and stuff. And that's a really hard, tough thing to do mentally too. So preparing myself for that. And I think just overall, focusing mostly on the stakes of my book, and my query letter that were different from other things that they had, is what got me the most bites. Because it's not that my book - they didn't have things with similar elements to my book. Because when you like to read something, you like to read that thing. I can't get enough witch books. 1000%. My agent loves witches and things like that. I knew she was perfect for me. But what I did was I didn't highlight anything in my query letter that was anywhere similar to any other books she already had. I highlighted everything that was exactly different.

Sabrina Ooh, okay.

Kaylie Did any of that make sense?

Sabrina That actually did. That's really interesting. Okay. That's really smart. So you looked at her wish list and you looked at her client list and you said, 'Okay, here's what she has. Here's what she's looking for. I've got some similar things to that, but here's the things that she doesn't have yet that'll add nicely.

Kaylie Yes.

Sabrina Okay.

Kaylie Exactly. So it's like when she opened it up, it wasn't like, 'Oh, like another bisexual witch fantasy.' It's like, even if she had already had that, that's not what I would have highlighted, because I would have known she'd already had that. So I just was like, 'Here are all the other things that make my book really cool.' And then when she reads a sample and automatically requests the full and reads that she'll realize, like, 'Oh, maybe some of these elements are the same, but this one is different. And I like this as well.' So, I always say kind of like, 'Play to your strengths in your query letter, and your Twitter pitches, because I think there are so many books that it's, like, really hard to condense stuff into just a query letter or a pitch.

Sabrina Pitches are especially hard. They're so tiny.

Kaylie Yeah. And it's like making sure that your stakes are definitely the most important thing. In my opinion, every pitch that ever did good for me was because my stakes were at the forefront. And my pitch is actually how my agent requested me. So I technically got her from the pitch event, and then also just making sure whatever was in it was just -I was highlighting those very different aspects, and not maybe going into too much detail about the growth, and the queerness, and the metaphorical aspects of it. Because she will get that when we talk. And she did.

Sabrina And she'll get it when she reads, too. Yeah.

Kaylie Exactly. So it sucks. But it's almost like because publishing is a business, I always say sometimes just make your book very commercially sellable to draw, like to hook. And then when they're hooked, you're like, 'This is why this book is very important and why I'm the person to tell the story.'

Sabrina So, what do you focus on in your pitch? In your tiny, tiny little pitch? [Laughs.]

Kaylie I know.

Sabrina Especially when you have an ensemble cast. Did you not even focus on them? I don't think you could. I don't even know if you could get everybody's name in that.

Kaylie Oh, no. Okay. I will tell everyone my pitch tips I usually give away. I'll do pitch critiques before a lot of Twitter pitch events. I've had to slow down a little bit because my life is so hectic. But it's like one of those things that when you learn how to query, and when you learn how to pitch successfully, hopefully you're not doing those things anymore. And then it's like, 'Where does this go?' So it's like, I will try to help anyone else that I can as much as possible. Otherwise, I have these two talents that are useless to me now. So, my pitching strategy. I have a couple of things. I know comps are a huge thing, but I think comps are very limited, especially to marginalized authors. Everyone wants comps, but when you're a marginalized author, especially like BIPOC authors, which like these cultural backgrounds, I'm sorry, there are not books for them to comp, or like, medium for a lot of time. They're paving their own pathway in publishing. And we need those stories. And I think it's unfair to limit them to two comps. So in my opinion, I cut the comps. I think that takes up character space that to be honest, I don't think you really need. I've never seen any agent turn down someone because they didn't have comps. That's my first thing.

Sabrina That's fair.

Kaylie In my opinion. I always tell people, like, 'You need more characters to tell the meat of your story. I'd rather you hook them with your story than hook them with someone else's.' And then I always say my rule of thumb, including in a query, is you get one place name and you get two character names, max. I feel like three names, like a setting and two characters are a lot already, kind of for the agent to remember or anybody, literally. Especially on book flaps. Even my copy, you really only hear about Calla and Ezra in the copy, because it's too much for people to mentally remember and stuff.

Sabrina Especially yeah. In such a short amount of space.

Kaylie Right. So I'm like, just keep that to the bare minimum, I say, like, two names is really a good sweet spot. So when I pitched mine, it was all about Calla and her stakes, and everyone else's you'll find out when you read the book sort of situation. So it was definitely like, I asked myself, 'What's the biggest element in my book that makes it stand out?' And it's the magic dice choosing her fate. And the stakes of that is if she rolls the wrong number, really bad things happen. She can start an entire war. So I did that and I just did kind of different iterations of that. And what I did was I did a fantasy edit, so it was just Calla and the fantasy world stakes, which was the dice and the fate. I did a romance edit which was about Calla needing help on this adventure and the help that she gets is from her ex boyfriend's hot older brother. And then I did an adventure edit. So I did an edit where it tells you that she has to go into a demonic sentient forest to reset her fate. So it's kind of like it was something for different...

Sabrina For everybody. That's really smart. That's super smart. Especially on the pitch events where you can post multiples through the day. That's genius. Okay, I'm gonna think about that. If I ever get brave enough to enter a pitch contest. [Laughs.]

Kaylie Yes. And you know what? So okay, exactly. You know what, I tell everyone. You really just should.

Sabrina Yes. Give people advice on those.

Kaylie Yes. Because I was really nervous. I did #DVPit and it was in a point where I was like, 'Am I queer enough to do this?' And even asking myself that question, I was like, 'F that. Yes, I have a very clear book. Yes, I'm queer enough to pitch. I'm just gonna go for it.' And it's what got me my agent. And so I'm like the thing is, it's Twitter. The tweets are deletable. You know, like, protect your mental health. Like, I understand, like, not getting likes and stuff. It's like a very hard thing to do, but I'm like, you can just delete it and pretend it didn't happen. But it's like, put yourself out there and like, you never know.

Sabrina I mean, if nobody liked it, it didn't happen.

Kaylie Right! And then if a lot of people saw it and you get agent likes from it, that's like the good part of it.

Sabrina Yeah. Do you want to give everyone your best advice for protecting their mental health while querying, or on submission? Because that sucks.

Kaylie I know, it's ... God, I don't even know if there is any good advice, to be totally honest. [Laughs.] Yeah, it's definitely like person to person. I will say I just threw myself headfirst into other things because if I distracted, and I forget about it, I'm fine. When I didn't query for very long, so I can't speak too much about the trenches. I have seen it, though, through my friends. And my heart definitely goes out to everybody. Because I think the worst part of that is you see people, they've been in the trenches for so long, and you're so happy when they finally get an agent. It's also hard to watch them slowly realize that that is not the end of it at all. And it's like that's...

Sabrina It's to start over again.

Kaylie It's so hard. Truly, I don't know if I'd have the strength to query with the sort of climate that the industry is in right now because...

Sabrina It's really slow.

Kaylie Yeah, even author books, everything is so slow. So I would say yes. I don't know, I don't have too much advice for that. Just definitely listen to yourself and your burnout and making sure that you're not miserable every second. You're not your book, like, your worth does not come from whether or not you have an agent or you're getting agented quickly or slowly. Like, time honestly doesn't matter. Sometimes right place, right time. And I mean that so sincerely.

Sabrina Some paths are really slow, and some paths are really fast.

Kaylie And a lot of times that has absolutely no effect on how your book is even going to sell once it's out. It's so unpredictable sometimes. That's my biggest thing. You are not your book. Your worth does not come from this one book. Like, you're worth as a person. And sometimes your book not getting picked up does not even mean your writing is bad, or your book is bad. This industry sucks, to be totally honest.

Sabrina It really sucks. There's too many books, there's too many writers. There's not enough agents and editors and people publishing them.

Kaylie Yeah. It's just one of those things. And then submission, oh my gosh, you can do this differently, especially per agent you have. I told my agent I did not want to hear a single thing back unless it was good news. Because if I wasn't getting regular updates, I could forget about it. And I was not on submission for very long. Again, a lot of my stuff was right place, right time. There's like a little bit of privilege in there, too. Like my position in this industry and things like that. So I always say not to necessarily look at my exact journey, but I will say submission is hard no matter what. Just because you get to acquisitions doesn't mean you'll get through acquisitions. It's a very tough mental state to be in. So for me, I was just like, 'I want to forget about it. I don't want to remember that I'm even on submission. Don't tell me anything.' So she didn't. She never updated me. I did not hear about my passes, rejections. I only heard when I got my offers. And that worked very well because then I started other books and other projects and I was la-de-da. And then when I got that call, it was like the best day in my whole life.

Sabrina It was just really exciting. Yay. And you didn't have a bunch of downers beforehand, yeah.

Kaylie Truly. Now some people can't do that. They need to know and I respect that. But I would say that if you're becoming obsessive with getting to know and stuff, like just reflecting, making sure you're not making yourself miserable, you know what I mean? Because it's really hard.

Sabrina It is.

Kaylie But yeah, I feel the same way about authors, like, looking at reviews and stuff. Sometimes it's really hard not to. But also don't make yourself miserable. There's no reason to, you know?

Sabrina No. Sadly. It's really easy to make yourself miserable.

Kaylie Yeah, genuinely. I think my advice on my website for so long, so I used to get so many questions about it is just be incredibly kind to yourself and what you're capable of. And the thing is, it's gonna be okay if it's not this book it could be another one. And I know that's so much easier to say when you're on this side of it, but even when I was there, I was just like, 'If it's not the time, it's gonna be fine, I'll do it eventually.' I wasn't super worried about it. But it's hard. It's so hard. And I feel for everybody. Like my heart goes out to everybody.

Sabrina You know, one thing I've learned that's really interesting from doing these podcasts and talking to everybody, even from your story about *A Ruinous Fate* is that you just said sometimes it's not this book, but it might be the next book, but also sometimes it might be this book later. There's a lot of times that I've heard of an author shelving a book for a while. You kind of came back to it a lot. I've heard of other people that they finish it, it sits for a couple of years and then they're like, 'Oh, and now it's sold.'

Kaylie No, it's so true. I am a big proponent because I have heard -or like seen - tweets and people are like, 'Oh, I have to shelve this project. I'm so heartbroken.' I'm like, 'Hey, that project is not dead.'

Sabrina It's right there. It's right there.

Kaylie It's just put away for now.

Sabrina It's sleeping.

Kaylie Exactly. It's hibernation. Because I've had friends who will be on sub and their book dies on sub. So they'll write another book and that one gets through. And as soon as that one gets through, that book that died on sub will get through as their option book. Or like nothing's ever dead, in my opinion.

Sabrina The only person who can kill it is you, yeah.

Kaylie Exactly. Cause so while I was on sub for *A Ruinous Fate*, even the little time it was on, like I threw myself headfirst into this other project which I still love so much. I love that book. I got like 80,000 words in, my agent loved it. But both of us were just like 'It needs so much work.' It was - originally I wanted it to be a standalone, because I didn't want to write two series at once. And that concept did come back. Like, the book I'm writing right now that isn't part of the *A Ruinous Fate* series is a standalone. Like, I stand by that. But that particular project needed to be a series. It was just very clear that was not a standalone book. The one I'm writing now is, but I was like, 'That's gonna take so much work to undo.' I was like, 'I'm not even gonna bother with that.' So I shelved it. But I think about it all the time. And I've even used a few pieces that I was very fond of in other places. And when I revisit that, it'll definitely kind of morph into something else. But I was like, 'Even if it doesn't, I have still gotten out of it what I need to get out of it. The pieces that I've pulled from it were just learning more, like craft.'

Sabrina You do. You learn a lot with each project and you grow a lot, yeah.

Kaylie For sure. I learned so much about pacing. The fact that I could even recognize that that was not supposed to be a standalone book, like the pacing was off, was like a very nice moment for me because I was like, 'Oh, I'm growing as a writer. I recognize that this needs to be extended.' Like the pacing is bad. And I was like, 'That's a nice lesson.'

Sabrina That's not necessarily something you would have recognized a couple of books back, I guess.

Kaylie Right! Exactly. So for sure. That's such good advice. Nothing's ever dead.

Sabrina It is. And it's true too. It's super true. Honestly, it's pretty common, I think.

Kaylie Yeah, I was about to say. Yeah, I feel like it's always so funny to see where books come from when authors talk about it. It's my favorite thing ever because it's like 'Sometimes the journey is just very strange.' I think that's so fun. It could happen different every time.

Sabrina They are all different. I love that.

Sabrina Okay y'all, that's it for part one of Episode 11. As always, I've got all the Kaylie links and the content list in the show notes page of my website, linked below. Don't forget to check out the 2nd half of my interview with Kaylie, where we'll discuss bullet point plotting, writer's block as a symptom, the inspiration behind *A Ruinous Fate*, and you'll get a sneak peek excerpt from chapter two read by Kaylie! Thanks so much for joining us!