

## LitTea Podcast: Episode 8 Dahlia Adler Part 1

- Sabrina Hi everyone! Welcome to episode 8 of LitTea, our first two-part episode and my longest intro to date! I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and I'm so excited to be joined today by Dahlia Adler! Her anthology *At Midnight: 15 Beloved Fairy Tales Reimagined* comes out tomorrow, November 22nd. Dahlia is the founder of LGBTQReads.com and the author of *The Radleigh University Trilogy*, *The Daylight Falls Duology*, and *Just Visiting*, and the Kids' Indie Next picks *Cool for the Summer* and *Home Field Advantage*. She's also the editor of *His Hideous Heart: 13 of Edgar Allen Poe's Most Unsettling Tales Reimagined* and *That Way Madness Lies: 15 of William Shakespeare's Most Notable Works Reimagined*. Okay! Now that I have no voice left, let's jump in!
- Dahlia Hi everybody. My name is Dahlia Adler. I am the author of a bunch of books and the editor of a bunch of anthologies. My most recent novels are *Cool for the Summer* and *His Hideous Heart*. And as far as anthologies go, my specialty is collections of YA reimaginings of classic literature so that has included *His Hideous Heart*, which retells the work of Edgar Allen Poe, *That Way Madness Lies*, which retells the work of William Shakespeare, and the book that we are here to talk about, which is *At Midnight*, a collection of 15 YA reimaginings that reimagine fairy tales.
- Sabrina I'm not finished with it yet. I've been so behind on my TBRs, but it's so good. I just did Stacey Lee's and I did yours the other day. And yours was so fun, because it was so cool to see a fairy tale that's usually got magic, with tech. I loved that!
- Dahlia [Laughing] Yeah, I'm not a big magic person. Everything I write is realistic fiction, generally contemporary. I've done historical only for anthologies, and probably never again because it's really hard. I just do not have that kind of research time. But yeah, it was really fun to play with, and do in kind of a different way and I knew that I was gonna do something that was really contemporary. But I like how tech plays in, in a couple of stories in the collection. Because it's true, we kinda make our own magic these days. So the way that magic looks in the now times is a little bit different. So that was a really fun thing to do.
- Sabrina It is. It's magic in the real world. I've got this to where I can handle it, but like actual tech stuff, it's too over my head, too smart, I don't know. Did you have to do a lot of research for that?
- Dahlia No, I didn't really get into it that much. I'd had some more research into math competitions and coding competitions, and stuff like that, but I didn't have to learn actual coding for it. So there's that. It's funny because I now... I just started working for what's technically like a tech company. I'm still an editor, but it's a gaming company and it's like a totally different world. So I am getting immersed in just how different the tech world is, pretty quickly.
- Sabrina Yeah. I got some fun little 'would you rathers' to start us off with.
- Dahlia My five year old's favorite game? Okay.
- Sabrina I know - they're bookish. Would you rather read bad writing but an incredible story, or incredible writing but a bad story?

Dahlia Incredible writing but a bad story. I can't do bad writing. I can do somewhat cheesy writing in a romance. If the chemistry is really good. I will plow through to get to the scenes where the chemistry is really good, if you know what I'm saying. But that's it. That's like my only tolerance for bad writing, and otherwise it'll ruin even the best story for me. But if you have great characters, I don't care that much if your plot doesn't hold up, for example.

Sabrina Okay, that's fair. That's fair. And then if you could only read one, would you rather read the first page or the last?

Dahlia I want to say the last because, like, a killer ending is just my favorite thing in the whole world. And I will remember that more than I will remember my favorite first pages. I will remember my favorite last pages, but I feel like there's always - you know, last pages being truly great hinges upon the rest of the book holding it up.

Sabrina It does.

Dahlia Yeah.

Sabrina It's such a hard one.

Dahlia Yeah. I mean, between the two - last pages definitely have more interesting potential. But, like, are they gonna be that exciting if you don't know everything else? I don't know.

Sabrina I don't either. I know it's such a hard one.

Dahlia I'm too technical for these kind of like, 'Oh, yeah, I can answer that on a dime.' But I am definitely a person who is more excited by a great last page than a great first page.

Sabrina That's fair. Yeah. It's the culmination of everything coming together that really solidifies a book for me once you get to the end, I think.

Dahlia I also really like thrillers, and especially psychological thrillers, and some of those that really, really screw with you on the last page. I think that's just, like, the best feeling. So particularly as a fan of that genre. Like, last page of a romance novel, which is another favorite genre of mine, like, whatever, that I probably prefer first page, but last page of a thriller is like, chef's kiss.

Sabrina Nice. Love it. Okay, so I think you've talked about this, but I'm gonna have you do it again anyway. So, what book made you a reader?

Dahlia I have been a reader for so long. I mean, literally since I was, like, three or four, and my siblings are much older. So I kind of had books that were years ahead hanging around the house, so *Baby-Sitters Club*, *Sweet Valley High*. Those kind of books made me both a reader and a writer. I also really loved books by Gordon Korman and Judy Blume. Those were big, big favorites of mine. And what else? Like, way, way earlier. Oh, and Beverly Cleary. Oh, my gosh, I cannot forget her. Yeah.

Sabrina Oh, Beverly Cleary. I haven't had anybody mention Beverly Cleary on the podcast yet.

Dahlia Oh, my God. No, she was -

Sabrina You just took me back.

Dahlia She was very largely responsible for my being a reader. The life they were living didn't look anything like mine. Like, I grew up outside New York City. I grew up economically privileged. Like, it wasn't the same world. But I think that Ramona's big feelings. And, you know, I remember her, like, having so much trouble with this girl in kindergarten and being afraid when she saw her parents fought. I mean, these things are so universal for little kids. And I feel like Beverly Cleary really thought about how kids feel in these situations, that maybe grown ups kind of laughed at having such big feelings over those things. And I feel like she was so sensitive and tender with them in a way that really spoke to child readers. I remember she had a book. I mean, I loved the Ramona books, but she had a book, *Ellen Tebbits*, that I loved so much that I literally would - when we borrowed it from the library - I would sit at my computer and try typing it up so I would have my own copy. I got, like, 13 single spaced pages in before I was like, 'Okay, this is nuts. I'm not doing it.' But if that's not reader love...

Sabrina It is. That's actually how I got really good at typing, was typing up books that I loved. That's how I practiced my typing. It was more fun than practicing random sentences.

Dahlia Yeah. Mavis Beacon's got nothing on Beverly Cleary. I know I'm dating myself now, but...

Sabrina That's okay.

Sabrina Okay. You get asked a lot about your favorite books, so I'm gonna twist it up on you a little bit. Who are some of your favorite characters?

Dahlia Oh, I love that. I'm very bad at names, which is embarrassing because that's even true for my favorites. But, Parker Fadley is an easy one. She's the main character of *Cracked Up To Be* by Courtney Summers, which is like, the big book that made me a modern YA reader. Where, as an adult, I was going back to YA was very, very largely due to that book. And she is just - Courtney Summers writes the best combination of, like, brutal and vulnerable characters, but not like, 'Oh, she's so mean because she's hurting inside.' It kind of is that, but it's also not. I love the way she does it. Parker Fadley was, like, my first big favorite. I love - I cannot remember their names, and I feel terrible about it- but Emma Mills writes some of my favorite contemporary YA fiction. And she writes great high intellectual IQ, low emotional IQ main characters. And the main characters of *This Adventure Ends* and *Foolish Hearts* are just two of the absolute best. I love them so much. What else? Favorite characters. Favorite characters. I love both of the leads in Kiersten White's. Oh, my God, what's it called? Her - they're Lada and Radu from her fantasy, her, like, very dark fantasy series.

Sabrina What is that called? *Bright We Burn* is one of them, but I don't think it's the first one. *And I Darken*? Is that the first one?

- Dahlia *And I Darken!* Yes! Both leads in *And I Darken* I love. I love the way she plays with their gender roles, and ambition, and with religion, and queerness, and everything in there. I love it so much. Those characters are great! I love Kestrel from Marie Rutkowski's *Winner's Curse* trilogy. I love that series so much. Yeah, those are some big favorites. I cannot believe I'm forgetting her name, but the main character of *Pointe* by Brandy Colbert. I remember wishing I would periodically check up on her after the book was done, which is like the best kind of feeling you want. Tasia from Candice Montgomery's *Home and Away*. She's just like, Candice writes fantastic voices, and that was my first experience with it. And her voice was just fantastic. And she plays football and she's just great. I love female football players. Also the lead, whose name I obviously can't remember. *Throw Like a Girl* by Sarah Henning. I really love female football player protagonist.
- Sabrina I picked up on this reading *Home Field Advantage*. It was weird.
- Dahlia I mean, yeah, I've loved so many of them. *Home and Away* and *Throw Like a Girl* and *Like Other Girls* by Britta Lundin. I'm just a really big fan of female football player protagonists in YA.
- Sabrina I love them too, and I think we need more of them, so let's just keep em coming, you writers out there. I'm into it.
- Dahlia I hope so.
- Sabrina Okay, I know you're super busy. Do you have any hobbies outside of writing and reading?
- Dahlia I just... the time is not there, which I hate to say, it's one of those things where I wish somebody had told me to make sure you have one. My best advice is 'Keep one hobby you don't monetize,' and I'm very lucky that I basically get paid to read, to blog, to write - all these things. It's all fantastic. It's very lucky. But those were all my hobbies, and now I get paid for them and now they're jobs, and now you look at them in a different light with a different lens of responsibility, and a different approach, and all these things that just make it a very different experience. I don't necessarily feel like I'm in control of what I'm reading next. And I hate that. I miss just choosing whatever book I want off my shelf. I've been doing a tiny bit of it lately and it's really nice, but for the most part... And part of that is because I finally closed to blurb requests this year. For anyone who doesn't know, blurbing is when you send an early copy of a book to an author and they read it, and if they love it, they say something nice about it that you put on the cover or on a praise page inside. And, I was doing a lot, a lot, a lot of that and it just was dictating every single thing I read. And as much as I want to support authors, and as excited as I am by getting to read stuff early, I was constantly reading books, like six to nine months before they'd come out. You can't talk about them with anyone. Missing everything coming out this year, so I took a little break from that and I think that was really good for me and allowed me to finally catch up on some things that I was really excited to read and just make more choices. Because nobody's asking me to blurb, let's say, adult psychological thrillers, nor should they. But I bought a bunch this year because I was really excited for them, and I wanted to read them, and I was getting no chance to do it. So, this was nice, to finally give myself a chance to do that. And then I read a really good one. So that was fun.
- Sabrina Okay, do you want to get into some anthology questions?

- Dahlia Sure. I love talking about anthologies.
- Sabrina Okay, well, I am going to let you go for it. Well, I was listening to your other interviews and I got so tired just listening to it. I was just like, 'Oh my God, it's so much.'
- Dahlia I will never make them sound easy. And yeah, it'll get boring hearing me talk about them over and over, because there is so much information, and so much is logistics, but that's just what they are.
- Sabrina Yeah, tell us everything. Well, as much as you can in our time. What goes into them, kind of how you get them set up, how you figure out who to have on, that kind of thing. All the fun details we may not know.
- Dahlia So, the premise comes first, and then I will run that - because I'm working with the same editor over and over again on these - Sarah Barley at Flatiron. I will usually run the premise by her before I get started with a lineup, but I usually have some names in mind and I'll even mention that and it makes it sound more exciting. Like, it's one thing to say, what about an anthology of Poe retellings? That went on submission, so that's not how this works. But just as an example, but 'What about an anthology of Poe retellings, and I'm gonna have Stephanie Kuehn and Lamar Giles and Tiffany Jackson,' and like then it's, I think, much more exciting. Okay, so premise and lineup come, they're pretty intertwined. And as for deciding who to have. So, I have a bunch of different approaches. It's like hard to explain exactly where I draw the line. I want people known for doing the general vibe of the thing. I am less excited to - it's not less excited - that's not the right way to phrase it. But I'm less inclined to have people who are specifically known for doing that exact thing. So, I'm not necessarily looking for somebody who all their novels are fairytale retellings, to then just show me how they do the exact same thing in a short story. Like, they're already doing it in novels. They're already crushing it. So to me, that is less what I want to pull in. I want somebody, though, who has a very - then, let's say I want somebody who has much more of a magical style of writing, or tackles the same kind of themes that are in fairy tales, or tackles something that I think the source material has sort of historically excluded this kind of representation. And so I want somebody to bring it in. For example, with Shakespeare, there's so many cross dressing stories, but they're not trans characters, at least canon. So for that, I specifically wanted some trans authors to come and retell some of those stories the way I think they should be.
- Sabrina Yeah.
- Dahlia So it's really a mixed bag. I mean, I have thoughts, from just like, 'Which author do I think is gonna take tragedy really far? Like no holds barred.' And that can be all I need for bringing somebody into Shakespeare anthology. Or it can be I think this person would specifically do really well with this kind of story. I mean, for the fairy tale anthology, for example, I think I didn't have anybody doing 'Cinderella'. I think. And I had to think about who I specifically wanted, who would be great for a story that was that. I think it was 'Cinderella'. But for the most part, yeah, I think about the vibe of the story and who's doing work kind of like it. And so I think would do a beautiful job with this, but we haven't necessarily seen do exactly this.
- Sabrina Yeah, you want it to be different from the work that they have out there too. Yeah.

- Dahlia Yeah. But I say that and it's not completely consistent, because I also wanted people who were doing amazing work with Shakespeare retellings to come do Shakespeare retelling stories. So I can't tell you exactly where I decided to draw that line. But yeah, it's not the most consistent. I just feel like I know when I know.
- Sabrina Before we continue on the production and stuff of anthologies, you did mention, I think in another interview, that sometimes when you're setting up the stories and you want to figure out who wants to write which one, especially when you're doing retellings, that there is sometimes some overlap and some like, 'I want this one.' 'No, I want this one.' So which ones are, like, the most popular?
- Dahlia That hasn't happened that much, I have to say. What happens more that I was really not ready for in *That Way Madness Lies*, which is the Shakespeare anthology, is that more people wanted to do - Like, I thought this person will definitely want to do tragedy and this person will definitely want to do comedy. And then I was wrong, and I had to change the lineup because I had specifically mentally designated, 'These seven people are gonna do this and these seven people are gonna do this.' So when somebody surprised me and wanted to do something different, I was like, 'Oh no, now one of my comedies is gone. I need a different...' But there has not been that much of everybody grabbing. It's funny because there were some authors who ended up dropping out of it. Like it just happens or authors drop out of various things. But there were multiple people who wanted 'Jack and the Beanstalk' for *At Midnight*. And then the way it worked out, it didn't even end up making it into the collection, because I think two different people who left were the ones who wanted that story. And maybe there was a third, but they had already taken something else. But I have not - it has not been like ten people said, 'I want Snow White' and only one person got it. That really has not happened. Which feels very lucky.
- Sabrina That is really lucky. That must be hard to be like, 'Okay, well, you get the one and everybody else...'
- Dahlia Well, I tell everyone to give me their top three, and then I do any sort of negotiations that need to be in there. So it ends up being fairly easy. I haven't had anybody be like, 'I'm only doing it if I can do this one story.'
- Sabrina And nobody's been sad about it afterwards. You seem to have produced some really great stuff.
- Dahlia I don't think so. Or, been like, 'I only knew how to do it for that origin story.' I tell people, 'If you are really attached to one specific one, tell me that.' And I don't recall anybody having been like, 'I only want to do it for this story.'
- Sabrina Okay. Gotcha. Yeah.
- Dahlia So it's not as messy as it sounds like it could be. Authors are more flexible than you would think.
- Sabrina They are. Yeah, we can adjust.

- Dahlia I'm not, to be perfectly honest. I feel like I would have been like 'This or nothing.' I only had an idea for 'Rumplestiltskin' ever, so I did not offer that to anybody else. But, other things - I would have done other Poe stories, but I was like, 'I am the least appropriate author for this collection.' I happen to be the person who put it together. I am the only one in here not known for, like, horror thriller, dark fantasy, so I will do what's left. But I ended up being really happy with my choice. I was not gonna be the one taking, like, 'Cask of Amontillado' or a 'Tell-Tale Heart', you know? But people choose lesser known things and shock me. People chose fairy tales I had never heard of, and I'm like, you could have chosen anything and you would have got it, but you want this obscure thing no one's heard of, and that is cool.
- Sabrina Yeah, there are some really unique ones in it.
- Dahlia So, people have mixed feelings about that, I know. But I think it's a really cool, positive thing. I hope. But also the original stories are included in the back. So even if you're not familiar with one, just like, go and get familiar. I mean, like Malinda Lo did 'Frau Trude', which I had never heard of and I think nobody has ever heard of, but it's like a three paragraph story. I don't know how she made this beautiful historical romance in there out of that, but it's brilliant. And that was really cool. And, so I read the story for the first time when she submitted her version and it worked for me. That was great.
- Sabrina It's really impressive to me because I've been reading it and seeing how short and how some of them may have no dialogue.
- Dahlia Yeah, it's really cool to see what people take out of source material that's barely there.
- Sabrina It's been really fun to go through. I've been doing the original first and then the retelling because a lot of them I'm like, 'Wait, hang on. Let me -' Like 'Rumplestiltskin.' I'm like, 'I know 'Rumplestiltskin', but do I remember all the nuances of 'Rumplestiltskin'?'
- Dahlia Also, there are different versions. So I specifically asked the authors, tell me which one you based yours off of to make sure that I have a correctly corresponding one in the source material section. So you may know the Hans Christian Anderson version of a Grimm tale. Whatever. You know what I mean?
- Sabrina Yes. Okay, where were we? Okay, so you have your contributors. You take it to your editor. They are like, 'Yes, let's do it.'
- Dahlia Well, there's back and forth with the editor about contributors, too. I will suggest some people. She will suggest some people. This is very collaborative. And actually, in *At Midnight*, there are - I've gone through so many authors at this point. So she's like, 'Well, here are my recommendations from my authors.' So there are actually three authors who are already publishing with Flatiron who are in the collection. Because she's like, 'Here's who I think' from. They all did a fantastic job. There was certainly no argument from me about them. But this, more than any other lineup, was really collaborative.
- Sabrina Okay, cool. So then, how does editing and stuff on those work? Does it take as long as working on your own, for you especially because you're editing? What's more time consuming, putting an anthology together or writing your own book?

- Dahlia Well, I mean, the writing your own book part takes forever. For editing, an anthology probably takes longer. So I do it on a rolling basis. I tell my authors, here's your deadline, but send them to me anytime leading up to that. And then, I will edit and send back as they come. So if it's due in June and you turn it in in March, I will edit it when it comes in March. So that's helped me. I'm not sitting down and editing 15 stories in one shot. So that's how it works. They send to me, I send back. Sometimes it's literally just that one draft. Sometimes it's back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. There's been at least one to two stories that are heavily edited in every collection, which I like editing. So for me, that's cool and been great to be able to do. And get some fiction editing experience in there. And then once they're all done, I put the whole thing together in one manuscript form, and I send it on to the publishing editor. And then she takes a look. If she has any additional comments, she sends them back to me. They go back to the authors, they come back to me, they go back to Flatiron. And then copy editing, proofreading is all kind of the same. What's difficult about it is they send me one document, and as far as I can tell, and I hope somebody is listening who can tell me otherwise in time for, like, whatever my next anthology is, there is no way to separate out the stories, leaving all the edits and comments on them. So I can't be like, 'Melissa, here's yours,' and, 'Malinda, here's yours,' and 'Becca, here's yours.' It has to be 'Everybody here's the whole manuscript. Edit just your story and bio, send it back to me.' They do that, and then I transcribe all their corrections onto the main document.
- Sabrina Oh, my gosh.
- Dahlia So, I mean, it's good because that way I really get a thorough look at everybody's edits. But it is definitely easier to make mistakes when there's that whole extra level, and then obviously it's more work for me to be transcribing instead of just like the author is doing it. So they're still doing the same amount of work they would do either way, but I'm doing the whole extra transcribing and yeah, so that's at the copy editing level, and the proofreading.
- Sabrina You do a lot of extras with the anthology. You're the one who has to deal with the contracts, and you said you send out checks and stuff, right? Yes. Talk to me about this part.
- Dahlia Yes, that all sucks. [Laughs] No, my editor I mean, I'm sorry. My agent, Patricia Nelson, is wonderful. There have been some agents who are like, they seem to think they're dealing with a publisher and not just like, literally just me, but that's who these contracts are all with, the contributor agreement. So they'll come to me with, like, ten questions or things they want to push for, and I'm like, 'No, this is pretty standardized. Here are the two different things you can change.' So I've had a few where they'll send, like, a legal team at me, and I'm like, 'Patricia.'
- Sabrina I'm sorry.
- Dahlia Yeah. So it's been the first couple of anthologies I did. I didn't have a traditional relationship with my agent. She sort of represented, she agreed to just represent *His Hideous Heart*, and then I sort of sold the next one to my agent over lunch. And so she handled the contract for that, but she's not an active participant in the books in the same way that my current agent is. So Patricia is like, she'll be super helpful and she'll step in where needed and all that, but everything goes through me first, so I'm certainly at least the one initially doing all of this. And then yes, I'm the one making payments. Yeah.



Sabrina Are you like, physically writing those checks out yourself?

Dahlia Yeah, I finally found that I can send them through a website. So at the beginning of Covid I had to pay - I had to send for *That Way Madness Lies*, and I was like, 'I don't know what to do here.' Nobody was at their agencies or whatever to get checks. So I emailed everyone else like, 'Do you want me to send wires instead?' And I didn't know that wire transfers cost money, so I was eating like \$18 on every single one of those and I'm like, 'I'm not doing that again.' But now I found where you can send paper checks through my bank's website. And so that's my method. So that's made it a little bit easier. But it is super annoying. Now the other part is 'You're doing it okay,' but fine, you're doing it twice or three times, whatever the contract breakdown is, ha ha. When your anthology - if you're lucky enough to have your anthology earn out, and that's pretty rare. But then you gotta deal with royalties every six months. And *His Hideous Heart* actually did earn out.

Sabrina That's awesome!

Dahlia But any money that comes - so, I get the lump sum payment and then I split it in half, and then the rest gets divided by twelve.

Sabrina And you have to do the math on this too, don't you?

Dahlia So, I have to do the math and then send these like \$10 checks.

Sabrina Oh my gosh.

Dahlia I mean, may it someday be more than that, but literally on the very first check, the very first one, after it earned out, I was sending everybody \$30 checks. The next one, I'm sending everyone like \$10 checks. I haven't sent those yet, but they're coming. They're coming, everyone. There's one imprint that's known for - one publisher that's known for doing the paperwork for you. And it is my dream. I mean, I love Flatiron, but it is my dream to sell an anthology to Candlewick, just to have the experience of someone else canceling the paperwork.

Sabrina Instead of you?

Dahlia Yeah, I mean, they're fantastic. I contributed to a Candlewick anthology and they fully send me a paper royalty statement every six months. I'm like, my own publisher doesn't do this. Yeah, no, they're amazing. So I would kill for that. And then my fourth anthology is coming, winter 2024. And that's my first coedited one, and different imprint, same publisher. So we'll see it's a little bit of a different experience and that I get to at least split the paperwork with somebody, which is nice.

Sabrina Okay, cool. Okay, so you said that contracts for the contributors are pretty standard. How long are those? Are they shorter than like a typical publishing contract, or are they about the same length?

- Dahlia These are like three pages. They can be. So Candlewick's was like a real thick contract when I signed that as a contributor. But in general, they're like these three page things, and everything is tied to a frame agreement. So that's part of what will come up, is an agent will be like, 'Can you do this?' And I'm like, 'No!' direct contradiction. I mean, it's not their fault. They don't know what's in the frame agreement. But I'm like, 'No, I cannot give you any of these five things because it all refers back to the agreement that I already made with Macmillan.' So that's the complicated part there. Yes, I truly hate the agent negotiation part so much. That is absolutely the worst part. And I feel very grateful that Patricia helps with the worst of the worst.
- Sabrina Actually, I got to read one of the stories from *Out of Our League* already. My Pitch Wars wife, Carrie Allen, I got to give her some feedback on it. 'Kylie With An I' heard a few little things from her, and she was like, 'Oh, I have the whole book', which is what you're talking about because of the copy edits. She was talking about contract stuff with it and everything and then learning that you're the one dealing with all of it. That's so interesting.
- Dahlia It's a lot. You will learn a lot about publishing by doing it. But I think a lot of people get very excited by the idea of coming up with a concept and bringing in authors and they just don't play it through regarding all the work it will be, and also how much it makes a difference what authors you choose. I mean, sometimes there's nothing you can do. I have a friend who has anthology editing experience, came up with an idea I thought was really fun, and she was just like, 'I'm gonna give them no way to say no.' Her entire lineup was, like, best selling authors, like, incredible. And it still didn't sell.
- Sabrina Oh, my god.
- Dahlia I can't explain that, but there are other ones where I'm like, 'Oh, I can't believe this didn't sell.' And then I look at the lineup and I'm like, 'It is so lovely that you wanted to bring in all these new authors,' but there's got to be some names where people are like, 'Yes, I am buying it because that person is in it.' But you know what? I say this. And lately, people who have no prior publications are selling anthologies. So, like, truly, what do I know?
- Sabrina Publishing is so weird.
- Dahlia Publishing is super weird. Yeah. One of the coolest experiences I've had with an anthology is that for *His Hideous Heart*, which was my only pre-Covid anthology, they asked if we wanted to narrate our own stories, so, like, half the authors did.
- Sabrina That's awesome.

Dahlia So I actually got to go to Macmillan and go in their sound booth and record it, and I'm a terrible audiobook narrator because I am. I mean, first of all, I hate the sound of my own voice. But I'm also just a very fast talker. They had to keep slowing me down over and over, and I had a lot more to read than I expected because one of the things I do for these anthologies that is also not particularly standard, is I write introductions for all of them. I write bios for the people behind the original work. So I actually do a little more for these than is standard for anthologies also. And then I had to read those things and I was just like, 'Please, I have to stop listening to myself at some point.' But I love that that collection is like half narrated by the authors. I mean, all the respect in the world to audiobook narrators and like, this is not an 'other people should be taking their jobs', but that's a full cast one. I mean, there's still like a bunch of audiobook narrators doing it too.

Sabrina I could not do that. When I have to do my intros and stuff, I have to record them like 40 times. I've learned all the words that I can't say, doing this thing. That's so cool about the - so you got to go to a studio. How long does it take to narrate? Was it a day thing? Was it a couple of days?

Dahlia No, I mean, I think I went for a couple of hours.

Sabrina Okay, cool.

Dahlia I mean, I also recorded the original 'Ligia', so that took a while because Poe is not so easy to read in the original as you might think.

Sabrina Oh my god.

Dahlia It was funny. That was my favorite thing about - well, one of my favorite things about editing that anthology was like all the authors coming back to me and being like, 'Did you remember it being this description heavy?' And Poe is so much drier than you think because the plot is so good. Like the execution of the exciting elements is so good that you didn't take with you from reading it as a kid that there are like ten pages describing rooms.

Sabrina Oh, that's funny.

Dahlia So it was really funny where it just was not how anybody remembered the experience of reading Poe, which frankly included me. So what's really fun about those reimaginings also is that people kind of picked out the very exciting plot points and then pulled stories around them. So you get the more - it's much more modern in that way as well.

Sabrina More action and dialogue and less room description? That's fair.

Dahlia I don't mean to sound like totally disrespectful of Poe's original writing. Obviously he's a brilliant author. We have different tolerances for different things in this age.

Sabrina I don't think you would have done an anthology based around it if you didn't like it or had no respect for it. You're good.

Dahlia I feel like that's safe to say. But you know what people have. Because I write these introductions about these collections in large part being to make this work more accessible and inclusive to people who were sort of shut out by it or have lived with the repercussions of the stereotypes created by, for example, Shakespeare. People do sometimes think that I hate the original authors. And I'm like, that is not why I'm doing it. I got like a real hate mail about doing *That Way Madness Lies* basically like a 'How dare you.' And I don't know how you view this as disrespect of the original author.

Sabrina I find it like the utmost respect.

Dahlia Right. I know you were writing in the 1500s. Yes, but it's interesting how some people get that it's an homage and like, also you surround yourself and work with the work that you love, that maybe you want to make more accessible and inclusive. You know?

Sabrina I was gonna say what you said earlier was perfect. More inclusive and more accessible to modern day readers now, who want to see themselves in the stories that they're reading.

Dahlia Yeah, I'm not trying to write better Shakespeare. I'm trying to write a version of 'Merchants of Venice' where Jews are not strictly the agency-free villains. That's all.

Sabrina Well, the nice thing about these two is that you include the original. So it's still there.

Dahlia Actually, we did put a little content warning in *At Midnight*, which I have never done for the originals, because they are so racist. And it's one of those things where the way that you probably consumed them as a kid was in a very dignified format, or just more kid friendly books, and you do not necessarily know what you're in for. It is very different reading the originals of some of these. So this is not the format in which most people are familiar with fairy tales. Like, they have not necessarily read the original, original text.

Sabrina When I was a kid, they did a lot of I think it was on Disney Channel, maybe, or one of the kid channels, but they had a lot of those where they took the fairy tales and made the little movie.

Dahlia I generally read them and adapted for little kids five minute fairy tales kind of versions. So you really do not realize what you're necessarily gonna step into with these. And some of them are kind of horrifying. So I did want to mention that. It's not like Shakespeare where like, yes, there's definitely some offensive language in Shakespeare, but you know that. Shakespeare is what you've read. With fairy tales, I felt like it was pretty different than you actually might not realize how incredibly damaging some of it is.

Sabrina Some of them are so dark, too.

- Dahlia      Yeah, well, that I knew, and that I think people know. And I really, really wanted some people to bring that into their adaptation. It's funny, though, because some people I thought would go really dark with theirs did not. And some people I thought would go really light with theirs did not. So I think it's actually surprising what a lot of people did with the collection. Somebody asked me in an interview if any authors really surprised me with their story. And I'm like, 'Yeah, Roselle Lim,' who is like the sweetest, most magical writing author who like, I invited because she has this incredibly beautiful, magical way with writing, just her whole style and especially the way she writes about food and I just really wanted to see how it would translate. And then she writes this like, I mean, still great, but like this dark vengeful cannibalism story and I'm like, 'I did not see that coming.' And I'm thrilled to have it. Don't get me wrong, it's a great surprise, but I did not expect that from the work she's done so far.
- Sabrina      That's so funny.
- Dahlia      But she's only done YA in short stories. Otherwise, she does adult. So it's kind of what I love about anthologies is you might do something for a story that you would never do in a full-length novel. So if it brings that out for anyone, that's cool.
- Sabrina      That's awesome. Okay, do you want to get into some querying questions?
- Dahlia      Sure.
- Sabrina      So you've had a lot of agents, which is awesome, and you're so transparent about it, which I love. One of the things I wanted to ask you, and I'd love to get some thoughts from you are, not necessarily if you're in a bad relationship with your agent, but if things aren't necessarily as perfect as you thought they would be. Like, what are some things that you would suggest looking at if someone's considering leaving? Not necessarily like full on red flag, like run for the hills. But making that decision, especially right now when querying is so rough.
- Dahlia      Part of me feels like I can't even talk about querying in 2022 because it's such a different world from - I got my first agent in 2012. And I am well aware things are very different for so many reasons.
- Sabrina      They're very different.

Dahlia So anything I say with a grain of salt, because people querying now are much bigger experts on this than I am. But on me having things be iffy with your agent that I have experience with, although I will say I love my current agent, I truly hope I am with her forever. I just have to throw that out there because sometimes when I talk about agents and like red flags and reasons to leave, people are like, 'Oh my God.' I'm like, 'No, no, Patricia forever.' But she is my fifth agent. Like, that's real. I mean, everybody says this, but it is really important to have that communication with your agent, to let them know what's not working for you. A lot of times it's just a matter of communication style and it does mean they may have to modify what they're doing for you. For instance, I really could not stand it. One of my agents just like would not forward me rejections and I am a very I want to see exactly what they're saying. I want to see it when they're saying it. Other people don't want that. So I think it's important to be really upfront about what you can do, what you need. If you are somebody who needs hand holding, look for that in an agent. That's a good question for, if you are that type of person, to find out about the agents that you are querying like 'Is this somebody who is gonna hand hold me? Or is this somebody who is very businesslike, is very busy, is not really gonna have time or patience for this and I'm gonna be a really big outlier in needing that kind of attention' because that will strain a relationship. It's going to. But that communication is key. Telling them what's not working for you, but also figure out what's not working for you. Like is it X or is it an underlying thing that's leading to X? Like, do you feel like you're constantly in the dark because your agent is not telling you things? Or do you feel like actually your agent doesn't trust you with professional information because they think that you kind of go bonkers at everything you know, and there's sort of different facets to it. And it's hard! Like we have access to whatever information we have, and we have a lot of people who very openly panic about things, and a lot of authors need a lot of reassurance, and a lot of agents are completely buried in work, and don't necessarily have the time for that. It's really hard. It's really hard for everyone.

Sabrina Yeah.

Dahlia But, the problem is, and this is just really unfortunate for agents, they are the gatekeeper of your entire career. I obviously sympathize with agents who are just having like a really off time in their lives and for six months they need to basically check out. But what it means for an author to have that happen for six months can be like terribly dire. And just because you are not faulting that agent for needing that time, doesn't mean that you necessarily need to ride that out, which is not something I think everybody agrees with. I think some people are like, 'You have a good relationship, you should...' And that's also kind of true. Everything is so specific to your experience. Sometimes you have no idea what's not working, you just know it's not. So it matters what's not working. Like if your agent is not turning around stuff fast enough, yes, you have the right to have certain expectations. Yes, you have the right to move to somebody who's gonna read your work faster, but consider the size of their client list and whether that's really realistic and how much better that's gonna be with somebody else. Make sure other people are delivering what you feel like your agent is failing at, before you consider it like the reddest of flags that they're failing at it.

Sabrina You switch and then you're like, 'Oh, this one's even longer.'

Dahlia Yeah. Or like nobody is able to turn it around in two months these days, for example.

Sabrina It's really slow out there right now, I think, all around.

Dahlia Yeah, I know. I'm like trying not to say too much because it's really... it's such a different time and it's so hard and it's so hard to say leave your agent when I know it's 5,000 times harder to get one now than it used to be. You know, once upon a time we always said, 'You did it once, you can do it again.' And I still generally believe that, but like, can you do it again in two weeks? I don't know. It's different. It used to be you had publishing credits and you left your agent and you went to find somebody new and that could be a really fast turnaround. And I don't know if anybody is sort of offering that anymore for the most part, unless they're already really familiar with your work, or something. If you are a published author, definitely be aware of who already loves your work. If there are any agents who are already fans of your work who may have already read it, that's gonna move faster, that's for sure.

Sabrina If you're on anyone's wish list and you're looking for an agent, go to them.

Dahlia Yes. Yes. Oh my God. One of my friends is on my agent's wish list and I always want to be like, 'Come over here. How cool would that be?'

Sabrina 'Come hang out with me. Let's be agent sibs.'

Dahlia Yeah, I think that's cool. I know, I'm sorry that was so rambling. But it's so hard out there and it's easy for me to say jump to somebody new. But I also don't want to give the advice I never would have given and say cling to somebody, just bear with them for a year. Because I don't think you can just bear with somebody for a year and have your work not right. There is that balance.

Sabrina No. If there's that disconnect, I feel like it's gonna show up in your writing too.

Dahlia Yeah. Oh well, that's sort of my number one. If somebody is making you hate writing, you cannot stay in that relationship. I mean, communicate with them and try to fix it. Always, always the conversation first. Especially with somebody that you really do want things to work out with. But anybody who is eventually making you hate writing and especially hate your writing, you need to not be with. Like that's not good for you. It could even be that it's not their fault. But that doesn't matter. You can't have somebody on your team doing that to you mentally.

Sabrina That's not on your team.

Dahlia Yeah. Even if it's you, it could be your own anxiety. But again, recognize: is it going to be that anybody at this point would do this to you, or is it something specifically with your agent? And it requires talking to other writers. I mean, there are writers who put themselves out there and say kind of 'Ask me anything all the time.' Tess Sharpe is wonderful on Twitter, great person to follow on Twitter, take those opportunities. I mean, not to ask authors about their very personal experiences, but you can ask, 'Is this normal? Is this an outlier thing?' I'm suggesting this if you don't have your own group of friends, definitely try to make your own group of friends and ask them your questions. But you do... Sometimes people are really unhappy with their agents for things that then I hear about them and I'm like, 'Who do you think does do this?' Like, 'Oh, she didn't read your book a fifth time? Who do you think is going to do that in 2022?' And so you also have to temper your expectations with what is remotely feasible in the current market and industry and publishing world at large.

Sabrina So you've been doing this a while. Do you have any tips or advice on protecting your mental health while you're querying and on submission?

Dahlia I mean, nobody wants to hear, write the next book, but the answer is write your next book. Partly because it gives you something else to love, partly because if it doesn't work out, then you're prepared with something else. And I think that's a good reminder that your whole life is not, and your whole career is not, fully riding on what happens with this book being on submission, with this book being out to agents. You either have to disconnect entirely or you have to throw yourself into something else. I don't think there's such a middle ground. Talking to other authors is gonna make you nuts.

Sabrina You can get tunnel vision really hard if you only have that one project that you're writing on. You're only focused on the queries that you have out.

Dahlia Yeah, I'm very pro write something new. I know it's annoying. I know it's everybody's advice, but I just think it's the right advice.

Sabrina Hi friends! As promised, this is a two-parter, so don't forget to check out the second half of my interview with Dahlia, where we'll chat book swag, writing tips, and all about her incredible books. As always, you can find the content list and all the Dahlia links in the Show Notes page at [www.sabrinatlotfi.com](http://www.sabrinatlotfi.com). If you have a minute and are enjoying the podcast, please please rate or leave a review, and don't forget to tell your writing friends!

**End of Part 1**