

How Writers Survive: Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke

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TYM: Liz Fenton and Lisa Steinke have been lifelong best friends since 1988. I was very inspired by your website where you did it chronologically. So I have modeled this intro after that. In 2006 you start writing together and produce two manuscripts which do not get bought. Six years later, your third manuscript, *Your Perfect Life*, sells to Atria, Simon and Schuster, who also buy your next two novels.

You shift to Lake Union, where your first contracted novel, *The Good Widow*, kicks ass and becomes a bestseller. You contract for three more novels with them, for a total of seven. In 2020, you become monthly on-air contributors on the local news, hosting Liz and Lisa's Book Club, a segment where you discuss your favorite novels. And you start a podcast, *We Fight So You Don't Have To*. And in March of 2022, you release your recent rejection series for podcasts that focus on what's happened in your careers over the last couple of years. And that's what I wanted to talk to you guys about today.

We were just discussing before we started recording that everybody's talking about this—you have hit a real chord. And your openness and vulnerability and courage to talk about what have been some struggles really seem to have resonated with a lot of authors. So you do have seven published novels. You are very prominent in the writing community and in the field. By all accounts and all appearances, you are massively successful. And yet you have a rejection series of podcasts. Can you just sort of fill everybody in a little bit, who hasn't maybe heard it yet, on what was going on in your writing career that prompted this?

02:33

Liz: Well, Lisa is looking at me like... We have we have a weird, nonverbal thing where I know that she looked at me like, "You answer." So I think we were kind of...I mean, first of all, authors are not okay right now; we kind of talked about that a little bit. We had such an outpouring of support, and really like relatability to what we talked about. But for us personally, why it was time—it really felt like we had nothing to lose.

I think a year ago we wouldn't have been ready to talk about what we were going through. And we also were still really committed—because we're out on sub, submission, most of this time—to really having the space on social media, because we're worried if we look like we're failing, then no one will want to sign us. It's this weird catch. Sometimes you feel like you can't be honest, because you have to always look like you're succeeding or the publisher doesn't want to take a chance on you. So I think for us, two

things: We had nothing to lose, and also, to be totally honest, we didn't really think anyone would listen to it. I think it's why you hear all that honesty, because actually you can tell we kind of thought we were talking into a vacuum.

03:51

TYM: So you say you had nothing to lose, but, well, two things: One, you had nothing to lose, but you *are* out on submission. And you just said you kind of have to have this patina of success. So what was your thinking with that? But also, you didn't have to do this. Maybe you had nothing to lose, but something drew you to be this open and honest. I'm really curious to figure out what that was.

04:17

Lisa: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I think for me, anyway, I was just in a hole and just feeling so awful every day, you know, and missing writing so much. And you're just kind of waiting for these editors to tell you whether or not what you've written is any good and if you're going to have a place in their publishing house, and we just kept getting the "we're going to step aside," and I think after just so many of those, I don't know if we just lost hope or I don't know what it was, but the timing was just such that I think we were talking about, "What should we do on our podcast next? What should we talk about?" We had nothing, we had no content. We talked about the dog, the cat that...you know, everything, our entire history. And one of us was just like, "Let's just talk about what's really going on here."

You know, I had spoken with my husband at a particularly low moment a few weeks before that, and he was like, "You know, Lisa, everyone's been in the hole for two years in their own way, whether it's, you know, their job, or their family, or COVID, or a mix. And so why don't you just talk about it, or write about it, one or the other, but just get it out?" I think part of it was like, "Stop talking to me about it."

And it did feel like the right time to just, you know, just lay it out there. And like Liz said, I don't think we really knew how many people were going to resonate with what we were saying. But it was amazing. I mean, the outpouring of support, and just people wanting to hear that. So I think it was just, the timing was right. And we really didn't feel like we had anything to lose, even though you're right, we do what we do.

Liz: I think, yeah, I'd just kind of had it. And also, I think we tried to actually talk about it about four months before—and we mentioned this in the podcast—but we actually had recorded something and it wasn't good. I think it's something you need to tackle in the right way. And I think we were still just not in the right place to do it. It wasn't good.

Lisa: And then it was very stilted and robotic.

Liz: It didn't record correctly

Lisa: It didn't record.

Liz: Yeah, so we were like, "I think the universe is telling us this is a piece-of-crap podcast." So we walked away from it.

And then what we did this time was just we were a lot more organized. And we were like, “What is the message that we want to send? We don't want to be throwing anyone under the bus; we don't want to be whining or complaining; we want this to be productive.” And so when we came at it from that point of view, and structured them, it felt a lot easier.

Lisa: So you can add I think also, so many people had been asking us, “When's your next book coming?” And we just felt like...not that we were lying, but that we were just dodging the question and just, you know, stepping aside from the question, and we just needed to finally just answer it. You know, we don't know when our next book is coming.

TYM: Does it feel better?

Lisa: Yeah.

Liz: Yeah.

07:47

TYM: Yeah, there's a lot of pressure on authors in this whole business—actually I think, especially with social media, for everybody—but particularly in something like this, as you point out, to look like you're successful, to look like everything's going great, to always be hyping whatever you're working on. And that can start to feel draining, because I think it creates a false idea of what this career is. And one of the things I think can make it difficult for authors who are just starting their careers or are in the middle of their careers is to sort of...I think, Liz, you said you're pulling the curtain back on Oz, because of this thing where we're all like, “Oh, let's look as successful as we can.”

I think there's an idea with newer authors, especially, that you get your publishing contract and your bones are made, and you're going to be a *New York Times* bestseller and everything is smooth sailing. And I have been in the business a long time; you guys have too. I do a feature called How Writers Revise that's sort of jumping off of this—where authors talk about the many setbacks and challenges and stumbles that are part of a writing career.

What expectations did you guys have when you first started? You had two manuscripts that did not sell, so it feels like you would have been grounded in the reality of what this business was. But you both said this still hit you really hard. What expectations did you have? And how have those shifted?

09:16

Liz: Yeah, I think, you know, it took us five years to get an agent on our third manuscript. And then we had arguably one of the best agents in the business. We were at one of the best agencies. And so I really thought—I know both of us felt like—this is it.

But that debut book that came out at Atria...I mean, it didn't do very well. We were very lucky that they signed us to two more books. Looking back, I honestly cannot believe they did, but they did it before our first book came out, so they didn't know we weren't going to do well. So we did stay alive that way.

I think the biggest thing—two things, I think. The really weird thing about publishing is your past successes do not dictate the rest of your career where in other industries your history, if you have done really great, you'll get more time. I think in publishing there's just so much—so many great authors and great creators out there—you don't have that same thing.

TYM: You used to, but that's changed now for sure.

Liz: And then the other thing I'll say, when we came over to the Amazon imprint, as you mentioned, *The Good Widow* was our first book with them. We're switching genres, it was a huge success. I mean, that book still sells, and Tiffany, you definitely were such a great editor on that book. And one of the reasons it's such a great book is because of you.

TYM: You're too generous; that was y'all.

Liz: No, no, seriously, girl.

Lisa: Oh, no.

Liz: But my point is, that book is still sells really well. I mean, I just looked last night—that book has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, right? But I remember sitting with another author, and I was editing *Girls Night Out* and I'd driven up to LA to have dinner with her. And she's a couple books ahead of us. And I was like, "I'm quitting my day job to write full-time." And she said, "Hey, that's fine. And I'm happy you're doing it. But this won't...this may not last forever. And I just want you to know that."

And at the time, I was like, "She's negative." I think I told you, Lisa, I was like, Oh, but she actually was trying to nicely be helpful. I think it's okay to quit your day job, but I think you have to understand that when *The Good Widow* was succeeding, we truly thought we would continue, the trajectory would continue up.

Lisa: Yeah, weirdly, I think our expectations were higher the farther into the process we got. Like when we started out, we understood were a debut. And while everyone's really excited about us at the publishing house, it takes a lot to break out. And so when it didn't, we weren't like, "Oh, how did it not break out?" We were like, "Okay, we'll just keep going."

And then there was this moment of the *Good Widow* party at Amazon. What I should say was not a *Good Widow* party—it was a party that Amazon threw, but it felt like the *Good Widow* party because it had a drink named after *The Good Widow* and all these things. And I remember I looked at Liz, and she looked at me, and we were like, "We've made it. Like, this is it. We're finally here, all the hard work paid off." And we actually thought it would just keep going. And so I think to answer your question, our expectation was higher the further we got into it, for whatever reason.

12:38

TYM: Which makes sense, because you were having such success. And I do think there is this idea, you know, we're all modeling after the runaway successes—we all look at Stephen King, or JK Rowling, or, you know, who have you. And their careers *do* have longevity, and they *do* continue to build. But I think that's so much the exception and not the rule. And you can have a *New York Times* bestseller even and then who knows what will happen after that?

Katherine Center and I were talking and I think she told me it was her sixth book that hit for her. So I mean, it can go either way, but we don't really *talk* about that. So what can authors do? This is "How Writers Survive." So how have you guys? You are learning it right now. Your expectations, I'm assuming, have shifted to some degree. In what way? I know, Liz, you said you went back to your job.

13:31

Liz: I did. And for a couple reasons. I mean, listen, I had been there a very long time. I had worked in the industry for almost 20 years. And I wrote full-time for three years. And I needed a break. We were doing a book a year. And I was really proud of both things. And I really needed a break. But I did miss it even when we were still successful. There was a part of me...I'm an extrovert; I work in a very extroverted industry. And being a writer, as you know, is very introverted. So I did go back. I would've, even if I hated the job, I would have had to go back because we're making like \$1 a month right now, and we have to split it, so we're making like 50 cents each. But luckily, it's a job I really love.

I think it's interesting you mentioned Katherine Center—I remember when her sixth book broke out, she actually did a post and she said, "Everybody thinks this is my debut book." And I remember really relating to that—a lot of people think that *Good Widow* was our first book because it was a different genre and publisher.

I just think we have to all be honest, because I think if you think everyone's having all this success, but you're not, it's really easy to want to give up. And I think it's important for authors to be like, "Hey, I have had some success, but there's a lot of failures and that's normal," because I think when you lose motivation, which is kind of where we've been at for about the last year, you start thinking everybody's getting a book deal. Everybody's getting a movie option. And it really makes you feel like, "What am I even doing?" Like, "I can't do this."

Opening up and hearing from people actually has almost made me excited to write again, which is something I have not felt in a while. And so there is something to that, like, understanding that it's not just you, because I think to be able to create these things, you have to have confidence, you have to be excited, and you have to have hope. And so I think if we just are all honest with each other, a lot of us can recapture those things. Because I've just felt that just since we released the book, I was like, "Oh my gosh, like, I almost"—and I even told you this, Lisa—but I was like, "I almost think I want to write again."

Lisa: Oh, that's breaking news. Tiffany, that's breaking news.

TYM: Y'all heard it here first.

Lisa: You just broke some serious news. That's exciting to hear. We've had very different sort of reactions to what's been going on. I move into a mode of like, wanting to figure out how to get them a manuscript that's going to work.

Back when we were first writing, after the first two didn't sell, I had to really convince Liz to do that third book that ended up being our book *Your Perfect Life*. It felt very similar to what's going on right now. Not that I was having to convince her this time; it was different. But it was more like I saw similar themes to how she was acting and talking and feeling. And it sort of felt like this time for me, though, "I don't know if I'm going to try to do that. Maybe we're too far in." I think that's how far I was in the hole that I was thinking, Maybe this will just be it, maybe it's just time to stop pushing so hard, because maybe the universe or the editors, or everyone combined is telling us, "You're done." That's really where I got to.

17:23

TYM: Is your definition of success changing? For a lot of especially newer authors, I think success is, "I'm going to make millions of dollars; I'm going to be a *New York Times* bestseller." And as we've discussed, those are so far the outlier that it's like saying my retirement plan is to buy a lottery ticket. So I think we do have to think about how we define what being a writer is, what a writing career is, how you have longevity, and what success means to you. Has that changed for you guys?

17:52

Liz: It has for me, and a lot of it is just that I took that time to write full-time, which was this huge bucket-list goal for me. And I found it changed a lot for me, because now even if this next book sells and it is a Reese's book pick and does all the things, you know, I still want this other career too.

It's all about having joy in what you're doing. And I know that's a very cliché thing. But what I realized from this whole process and walking away is that the joy for me is like fitting that time in to write and feeling like it's something special. And maybe that is a book every other year, like a hardcover and then a paperback rather than being in this rat race of the book every year and all these things.

For me it's really changed, and I've said this to Lisa several times: This past year, I felt like... We each bring different things to the table, right, that are valuable. And you know, Tiffany, you've edited four books of ours, so you know how we work. And I told Lisa a couple months ago, I said, "I feel like I'm not bringing like my piece to it anymore. Because I've lost that joy." Like I'm more the bleeding heart, like my bleeding-heart shit that I'm bringing, I don't feel like I'm bringing it anymore. And I kind of feel like I'm in a place I could bring that again. But I think it's changing my expectations around it. I don't know if I really answered it, but I've really changed what I think success is.

I think success for us is like we're happy. We're consistently writing. We're enjoying what we're doing and we're writing what we want to write.

Lisa: That's it right there. It's writing what we want to write. I think we just keep...It's so easy to fall into that trap of like what you think the editors want or the market wants, and honestly, no one knows what they want. It's just you have to just write from—and this is another clichéd thing—but just write from

your heart, or write what you want. That's what we did with Your Perfect Life—we just finally were like, "Let's just write what we want." We were trying to write all this stuff and it was a disaster. And so once you just write what you know, or love, it translates.

20:32

TYM: You guys, both or one of you, said in the podcast that you—I think you both said—that you really like writing to contract. But I have interviewed so many authors for the How Writers Revise feature who have told me that the happiest they ever felt in writing was when they lost a contract, or they lost their publisher, or before they got published—for the exact reason you just said: that it became about the work and not the product. I think that's something that we have to learn in this profession is to separate out the art creative side of you and the business/commodity side of what you're producing, because they're two different things. And you can create a career based on whichever way you want to go. I mean, there are a lot of authors who are very successful with that sort of product/commodity mindset. And like you guys were saying, "Let's get a book out, let's make it be what they want, what's selling." But to me, and it sounds like to y'all too, it's become more about your process now than the product.

21:30

Liz: Yeah, and I might have, like, agreed with the off-contract thing before we wrote two books in the middle of our career that I'm not sure are going to sell. And so for me, like, I need to know—and this is such a personal thing, and Lisa, I don't even want to speak for you, but I think you agree...We've got books coming out and I want to know that what we're, you know... And that's fine. We also don't mind notes or having any, you know, we like getting notes. I don't, we don't like to write in a bubble. And I think we're pretty editable. That's also a thing for us, like I and we enjoy that.

Lisa: We like the process of the whole team coming in, and we have each other. So we're already have a second read in our own little group. But we like that process of like, you know, when you came in, and then you give your edit letter, even though at first...you have to digest the edit letter, and then you jump in. We like that process.

But for us, and we've talked about this a lot, we've heard from so many authors, and there's a lot of authors that really either don't want to think about the business side, or don't get the business side, but that business side is really important. There has to be a balance. I think just trying to ride in a bubble, without thinking about the business side, at least for us, would be hard because we do want it to end up somewhere.

23:21

TYM: Y'all talked about in the podcast, and I think this is something writers have to do to survive, is to diversify to a degree or, I guess, be light on your feet. And y'all had mentioned several things that you've got going—you have some nonfiction projects that you said you were working on, a children's book, you have an option that's been renewed three times for, which one, *The Year We Turned Forty*? And then you have...I can't remember which one that you're collaborating with two screenwriters, the Davids.

23:52

Lisa: *The Status of All Things.*

23:54

TYM: Yes. So is that part of your...has your strategy shifted for your career since all this happened? And is that part of it?

24:02

Liz: You know, the thing with the children's book and the nonfiction was really us in the last couple of years, and maybe particularly me, trying to find excitement in writing. I think Lisa, to her credit, if I came to her excited about something she's just like, "Okay, okay, we'll do it," because I'd be like, "I think I'm excited about this." And both of those things, I think, need confidence, and we had kind of lost that confidence.

I think particularly with the nonfiction project, we might probably revisit it now. I think it fits in with a lot of stuff that's going on. But I think that it was more me having an identity crisis and Lisa coming along for the ride. Which I appreciate, Lisa, thank you.

Lisa: And also it was that but then also we have always kind of been thinking about screenplays and other books. And this brought that back up.

But mentioning the business side earlier, we have always thought, because it is hard with just all your eggs in just the book basket, you do want to think about, How else can I contribute and sell things? And so I think it was a blend of both of those thoughts.

Liz: Yeah, and I'll add this: I do think from hearing from even some household-name authors that they're all having to diversify right now to continue to make a living; they're having to podcast, they're having to look at other...they're having to write under pen names. Because it's really, really hard to make a living now as an author, probably harder than it's ever been, unless you're John Grisham or like those auto-buys, where it doesn't matter. When you reach that level, it's different. It's a different ballgame than being on the New York Times bestseller list once or twice, like, those are two different things. But I do think to survive, you do need to be open to diversifying.

26:18

TYM: You guys are talking about sort of the merging of the art and the business. And I completely agree with you that we are not just creators. We're not just artists. If you want to have a writing career, whatever that means, and if you want longevity, you'd better treat it like a business. And in business, you do diversify, you do stay light on your feet. You—I hate this term—but you pivot.

26:38

Lisa: So yeah, girl. Lots of pivoting

26:43

TYM: Like, how can authors come into this...or how do you balance, I guess, those two things you talked about? Liz, I think it was you who said in the podcast, you talk about how, like, you pitched the

Audible Original. And you said that you got a rather crushing rejection for that, that was pretty incontrovertible. As a result, it further hampered your confidence in yourselves as authors.

Both of you mentioned, I think, imposter syndrome, which I'm the poster child for imposter syndrome. And yet, you're having to navigate those business realities that should not have anything to do with you as a human being or you as an artist, but it does. Because this is an incredibly vulnerable, naked pursuit in which you are putting much of your personal self. How can you balance these two things? How can you treat it both like a business, and also be true to your creative soul? How can you recover, when all these rejections, all the things that are going to happen in a career, keep you from doing the thing that's going to help you be successful if you persist?

28:01

Lisa: For me, the business side of it was what got me out of bed in July, August 2020. Because I knew that Lake Union didn't want to give us a contract for our latest book, because we weren't selling. It was very clear it wasn't because we couldn't write. And for me, looking at it from their point of view, looking at it from their business point of view, it helped me. It wasn't—and I think for other authors, that's important to think about—it's not your talent. It really is, at the end of the day, just a business. They're not looking at you; there is not a lot of loyalty, because there can't be. They have to look at the numbers. They all have quotas they have to meet. And they're going into meetings, and they're having to say whether their books are successful.

And so at least for me, if you think about it that way, it's less of an ego bruise. And more of, Okay, well, that just didn't sell for whatever reason. I mean, there's a million reasons books don't sell and there's nobody to point a finger at. There's just too many reasons. And so for me, I just think separating them out is what keeps me going. Because I know we can write I know we know how to do it. We've made people very happy with many books. And so that's how I strike a balance with it, personally.

Liz: Yeah, I mean, I think we're generally pretty pragmatic; Lisa comes from a TV production background, I come from a sales and marketing background. And so we understand why they didn't want to be in business with us anymore. How can they sell that going in, like two books that haven't done well. And also, there's a million people standing in line that want to take our place—with our agent, with our publisher. And there's so many talented people out there.

So I think you do have to understand when you see someone taking off like a rocket, they've probably had a lot of rejection, they probably finally wrote something that got in front of the right person at the right time. And they had a lot of luck. And that doesn't mean that they're not incredibly talented—they have that, but they've earned it. I guarantee you nine times out of 10, like the Katherine Center thing, again, it's a perfect thing—people are like, Wow, she just like came out of nowhere and took off. She's been working her ass off for 10 years probably before that book hit.

I just think it's important that you surround yourself with other authors that are also pragmatic. This happens even in my other line of work—I try not to get too involved with people that are really negative, because I think it's really easy to start feeling sorry for yourself. Not that we have not felt sorry for

ourselves. Anyone that has listened those podcasts know that we did have moments, but you do have to turn around.

And you also have to just laugh at yourself and laugh at it a little bit. And the messages we've been getting, and I didn't have a chance to post this...I've had like five authors either text or message us just in the last week that they've gotten "step aside" emails just since we posted, and one of them said today, "You know, it still stung. But I actually laughed when I got the email because of your podcast about it. It made me feel a little bit better, wasn't as awful."

31:48

TYM: I love that you're using it with your kids. Was it you who said that in the podcast? Or was that Lisa?

Liz: Yeah, it was.

Lisa: It was Liz.

TYM: Yeah, it's pretty hilarious. I so I'm also a writer under a pen name. And I got so many rejections for, gosh, I don't even remember which novel, that I made poetry out of it. Because you said in the podcast that they use the same phrases over and over, and they do.

And, as you said, I'm very pragmatic. Also, I understand this is a business. I understand that it's also very personal for people, and that's something I think would be helpful that I love that you said in your podcast that authors should understand: Nobody wants to reject you; they're not hurting you on purpose. It's a completely subjective business, where that is *part* of the business; they will reject many more people than they won't. And it just, you know, there's some canned responses.

You guys said such a great thing: It has nothing to do necessarily with your talent or the worth of your book. It is subjective as to the person reading it, the day that they are reading it, the publishing atmosphere, what is selling at that time, whether they can take it to their team and their team also gets enthusiastic about it—there are so many variables that really have nothing to do with you and the work. And so learning how to hold on to that self-confidence—or at least belief in your own work, even when it flags—to be able to pick it back up again, that's a huge basic skill I think a writer has to have to have a career that lasts—and a career that, let's just review, doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get on the *New York Times* bestseller list and you're going to make your fortune. You may not even make a viable living at it.

I talked about your day job—maybe your writing career might be the job you work to support your writing. Your writing career is whatever you do to make money. So you said something earlier, Liz, that I love: Find the joy in that. Like, what is it that you love? And what can you do with your life? If your ship does not come in, and you are not JK Rowling, how can you still love this and do it so that you don't wind up giving up on it when you don't want to?

34:08

Lisa: Holly, our agent now—Holly Root—probably I think what ultimately led us to sign with her is she said to us on the phone, “You need to write what makes you happy.” I mean, it's really that simple. Because we've written different types of genres, and we could have gotten a number of directions when we came to her. And she said, “As long as you're happy, and you're writing while you're happy, and it makes you happy, that's it.” And that really is very simple. But it's true. If you just stick to that, that's how you get the joy in it.

Because if you're trying to chase the market and you're trying to write the next this or that, it's not going to work because they're already two years down the pipeline with that—it's already way ahead. You're going to play catchup the whole time. And then it's not even really you. And so her attitude has always been one of just positivity and staying happy with it. And that that helps us a lot, and helps remind us why we really do this.

I think you can get caught up in that thought process of, I've just got to hit the *New York Times*, and I've got to do this or else it's not worth it. And I think if you get over there, then you won't be happy.

I think that's what happens to a lot of authors and why they might quit or just, you know, just hate it. Because they're chasing after the wrong end game, I guess. It took us a while to realize that, though, believe me. We had to hit absolute I think rock bottom, the Audible rejection. I think it was just after that we're like, okay.

Liz: like my issue with the audible rejection truly, I think, like, it's fine. It was only two paragraphs, right. But my issue was like, she basically said, “I'm not gonna buy *anything* from these guys, because they clearly can't sell audiobooks.” She didn't say it like that. She was very nice, thoughtful. But that is what I heard. And I'm just like, Man, we can't even sell an audio short story, which we have a bunch of short stories—like I had this whole fit, like, we could do that. And I love listening to them.

So for me, I don't know why that hit me really hard, where it was just like, “We're never going to buy one of these things.”

Lisa: I think we thought that was a slam-dunk—I mean, we could do that, no problem. And then when that rejection came in... But again, that rejection is based on sales; we had not sold very many audio books, even with *The Good Widow*, I don't think I think it was, you know, all of our books across the board. I just don't think audio was the thing, you know, for us. So if you separate it, and you look at it like that, then she's just doing her job. She has no business signing us up for an audible when she has all of these people, you see all the Audibles that come out, like they don't need ours. So it made sense. Like when you initially read that email, and she was probably more straightforward than most and I think we were used to...maybe we needed that, you know, maybe we just needed—

Liz: She was honest. Everyone else was, Yeah, we got Liz and Lisa, I was loving her Instagram, and they're so amazing. And wow. And like, but no. And yeah, it's almost like, they cannot sell an audiobook. But I mean, listen, and, you know, the, the idea is okay, like we, you know, maybe we could make it work, but they clearly can't sell any audio books. But she was being honest.

37:54

TYM: Yeah. And I think that has to do with expectations, too, being able to moderate what they are. You guys keep saying, “Everyone's doing their job.” And I think knowing that can help mitigate the impact of that.

But one thing this sort of makes me think about, and that I think a lot of authors struggle with, is there's this constant messaging of “Do social media, and do outreach, and do your marketing, and hire a PR person.” How much of this is really within the author's control? If you look at the two of you, you have huge platforms—what do you have, like 43,000 followers on...is it Facebook or Instagram? It's nuts. And you've got these high-profile exposures with your television show. And you've been doing book recs for I don't know how long—everybody wants a Liz and Lisa shout-out. By all accounts, you're doing everything right. And yet you just talked about your sales for X book weren't as good as you hoped they would be, your audiobooks aren't selling. How much is within our control? And how much of that can you get...should you actually put your eggs in that basket, knowing that?

38:56

Lisa: It's important to stay in the game is the first thing I think about, and so that's staying in the game, and it's reminding people like, I can go on television, and I can talk about a book, or “I'm still here on social media—remember us?” And so, for me, I think it isn't in our control. It's really not. I mean, the Bookstagram community is amazing. They do awesome things for books, they get the books out there, but how many books does that sell? I don't know. So you can do all the things and still not be a “success.” I think for us, we've just wanted to stay in the game with these others, and we like it too. I mean, we did a whole thing over the summer. And, Liz, sometimes these pop up and I cringe, but we did this 30 days of books thing. And—

39:52

TYM: They were hilarious. Why do you cringe? You did mine.

39:56

Lisa: I know but they didn't...it didn't help. So that's the thing. It's like, it made us feel good, and they were fun. But what did it really do for—

40:10

TYM: But does that negate it, because you can't know, right? Like, you just said, right, you kind of have to try.

40:14

Liz: that's to the point I was going to make. Marketing books and marketing is a fast-moving target. One thing I noticed when we had a book coming out a year is something that had worked—we always came out in summer, right. Something that would work one June, the next June, we start planning with your marketing and publicity team, you know, probably in March, February, March, wasn't working anymore. And so we have to constantly be pivoting, particularly, if you have a book coming out every year, because something that may have hugely worked, maybe the first, you know, group of people that went

in and executed these things well benefited, and then everyone executed and nobody cares about it anymore.

I think Lisa's right—you've got to do it because you want to do it, and we love talking about other books and supporting other authors. And we do that just because we want to, like we never were getting anything out of that. That's just something that we think it's important to do. But as far as book launching, and what works in publicity, I mean, my goodness, you really...that is such a fast-moving target, you really have to have your finger on the pulse and be creative, and really get there first with some of those ideas. Like look at BookTalk as a perfect example, right, like before it's Bookstagram. Now it's BookTalk. And they have about 10 authors whose sales have blown up, right? So I'll be curious to see how long that lasts. And how many authors get that boost before it moves on to something else and then it's not translating to sales anymore.

41:51

TYM: That's what can be so frustrating, I think, is that there is no magic formula. There's no magic bullet, and so much of it is just sheer chance and out of your control. And yet, what can you do except, like you said, Lisa, stay in the game. And if you want your work to reach people, you have to keep trying ways to do it. Ways that feel right for you. Dan Blank does a lot of marketing that he calls human-centered marketing that I think feels really organic, because it lets the author decide, "What feels right for me to be able to talk about the work I love and reach people I want to reach with it?"

42:25

Liz: I think yeah, and also being on brand. Most authors that spend a lot of time, they may not even realize they have a brand or that's their branding, but they have a brand. And it's not something Lisa and I talk about a lot because our stuff is pretty organic, but we are who we are. And we have a brand. And so I do think it's important when you're looking at what levers you want to pull for yourself, like, Are you staying on brand? Are you being yourself? Because I think that consumers are very savvy. Sometimes I'll see an author, God bless, but kind of go off brand to try to fit themselves into the box. And I'm just like, Oh, that's, you know, not really working. But I appreciate and understand why they're doing that.

But I do think when you're thinking about the things you want to do, like who are you? What are you really comfortable doing? Are you comfortable on camera? Are you comfortable doing this, because people know when you're not.

Lisa: And it's the same thing. It's like don't write a book that isn't a genre you don't really know how to write and don't try to do social media in a way that isn't you.

And the reason I cringe when those videos come up is just because that summer, we were just trying so hard to control the outcome of our book. And we just couldn't, I mean, despite all the things we did—and we had fun doing it—we just had all these different setups and crazy hats and all the things and it just didn't move the needle on *How to Save a Life*, and so that's just crushing when I remember how hard we tried. But that doesn't mean we won't try hard in the future; we'll just try did something different. I mean, you just have to try and fail and try and fail. That's what this whole thing is, whether it's a video

that you do in your backyard or it's the book you're writing, you just have to try and fail until you figure it out.

44:20

TYM: Persistence is something I have always used as sort of a catchword for how I operate in this business. But what I'm hearing from you guys that I love is *resilience*. You get knocked down—and you're going to get knocked down—and you gotta get up again.

44:37

Liz: Your teeth might even get knocked out—

Lisa: It's that song: like [sings] "I get knocked down and I get up again."

44:44

TYM: Chumbawamba. Yeah, "I Get Knocked Down." I worked at a record store in the 80s, baby. I know.

Y'all said one thing I want to explore and then I have a question, and I don't want to keep you too long. You keep coming back to ideas that revolve around the writing community. You have always—both of you—been incredibly supportive and giving to the community, involved in the writing community. You talk about how when you were looking for an agent, you went to your writing community. How important is that in a career with longevity? And how do you make yourself a part of it?

45:22

Liz: It's so important. There's a lot we're not really involved in, like, Tiffany you're involved in the women's...

45:31

TYM: Women's Fiction Writers Association. Yeah, it's my home organization.

45:35

Liz: Many people talk about that organization as being so amazing. And then there's RWA, there's all these groups. I think, because we have each other, we've never really joined because we're each other's group. But I think, you know, having that kind of support. And then also, I think, a great way in any business, and this is in, in my other career too, like, you know, be the person you want other people to be for you. So when people come to you, be supportive, be generous, be helpful, be hopeful for them.

And then I think you have the right to ask that back of other people, and just be happy for others. I think it's really important, and I think if you've never shown up for anybody, and then you need something and you start calling people...listen, there's people that will help you, but like, you need to earn that professional equity, in my opinion.

Lisa: Yes. And don't be afraid—and we talked about this—to take up space. Like when we were starting out, I have a very clear memory of sitting down with my laptop in my living room, and I just went through Facebook and I reached out to all of these authors and just said, “Hey, you know, we're just starting out, and we've got this website, and we want to be highlighting books, and we'd love to connect with you.” And Sarah Pekkanen was one in particular that responded right away, and we just formed a friendship with her. And then the next person responded and the next person. But we weren't afraid to just be like, “Hey, girl, you don't know who I am. But—”

47:19

TYM: But you weren't coming with an ask. I think that's key. You were coming with a give.

47:25

Lisa: Yes, we because we thought strategically from the beginning. We used to have a website, and at the time it was called Chick Lit Is Not Dead, because everybody was saying, “Oh, this chick lit, it's over, it's dead.” And we were like, “No, it's not; we still want to write that.” So that was what our website was called. But strategically, we thought we should highlight and support these authors that are either starting out or already established and just need people to hear about their books. It was a great way for us to meet authors, as well. And we were huge readers and huge fans of so many of these people like Sarah. And so it just felt like a no-brainer for us. But we weren't really afraid to even reach out to authors that probably some of them might have been like, “Who's this?” Like, “I don't need you.”

48:14

TYM: I think there's a genuineness to what you're describing. A lot of people think of networking as this schmoozey, yucky thing. And it certainly can be. I mean, I know people—I know *authors*—who network in a yucky way, where it feels very transactional. But there's a difference in approaching it genuinely the way that you just described. You're doing something for the community, talking about books, and that benefits you, yes—that's realistic. But you're also coming to people with, “Hey, let me feature you, how can I help you?” And I do think, to your point, Liz, that at some point, if you're putting that out into the world and into your community, you do have a right to ask for it back at some point. But I think going into it with that...there's a really subtle shade of difference between doing it with a genuine open heart and doing it with this yucky kind of, “I want something from you so I'm offering you something.”

49:06

Liz: And we weren't doing it for that. And then you know, it just so happened, you know, later when this agent thing went on and we were like, “Uh-oh, we need some help.” And everyone was so generous when we asked.

I do think it's important that we don't get so caught up in our own success that you're not willing to help other people. Lisa mentioned this on the podcast, but you do have to find a space where you're happy for other people, even when you are truly failing. And if you can get there, it will really change you. Again, we have each other, so it's different because, you know, she gets in a hole or I get in a hole, the other person will be like, “Hey, you know what, this person's worked really hard. And it's okay to be happy for them even if they're getting all the things that you want.”

TYM: And it's also okay to be envious, and it's okay to have that moment of, "This feels shitty!"

50:04

Lisa: you need to lean into the envy and the disappointment for a little bit, just a minute.

50:12

TYM: You can't deny it's not there because then that doesn't really plasticky, but you

50:16

Liz: They can coexist.

50:19

TYM: You can say, I want what you have, and I'm happy that you have it.

50:23

Liz: We're not saying put those feelings aside. So we're actually not saying that. What we're saying is we will have conversations where I'm like, "I am so goddamn jealous of this. But I know that this person has earned it. I hope to get it one day, but man, I am so jealous. I felt almost nauseous when I saw this." It can coexist. They're not mutually exclusive. But you have to have the self-awareness of your jealousy, because what I have seen, sometimes people just attack: "Well, she's not good. I read that book." It's like, no, don't do that. Recognize that you feel jealous about it.

TYM: Which is just human.

Liz: But that's also like—what is it...I always say this thing wrong, but like the tide rising...

TYM: A rising tide lifts all boats. I love that.

Liz: Now be honest, guys, like women authors achieving things is good for all of us. They're getting movie deals getting publishing deals, podcasts, it's good for all of us.

51:27

TYM: And their success does not take away from the piece of...there's not a finite pie. Their success doesn't mean you don't get that piece of pie; like you said, the pie is infinite. And it means that there's more pie—more pie for you to get in on, it's creating a readership.

51:42

Liz: And bringing them down isn't going to get you where you want to be.

51:47

TYM: And it's going to eat your soul.

Liz: Well, right, just acknowledge, I think there's nothing wrong with being jealous and jealous all the time about stuff. I think you have to have a self-awareness about it.

51:57

TYM: It's part of that realistic, it's part of being an author, I think, and I'm talking...it's funny, I'm thinking about this a lot now, because I'm working on a follow up to Intuitive Editing that's about character development. And I talk about our best resource is ourselves. And as authors, there's so much you can learn by being self-aware, to your point, like understanding that all these things that you feel are human; there's every infinite combination in us of good and evil. And we can feel horrible things and do horrible things and still feel great things and do great things and be decent human beings. Because all that's just super human. And that's okay.

But if we push that away from us, not only, I think, does that make us fake in our interactions with people and that makes it harder to be happy for people. But then I think it makes you less genuine in your writing too. You have to get pretty naked and real to be a great writer.

All right, I promised I'd keep you an hour, but I can't let you go. First of all, I want to thank you for being with me today. And also just for the wonderful experience of having gotten to work with you all these years, which is such a pleasure. I miss it so much I can't tell you.

But the fact that what you've done, I think, is so much a part of what you do by giving back to the writing community; your sort of laying it all out there on your podcast, I think, is a gift to the community. So thank you for that.

But before I let you go, I'm thinking of newer authors here, but also authors who have been in the business longer and maybe aren't where they want to be, or have been where they want to be and then, you know, you could be a *New York Times* bestseller, and then nobody buys your next book. Things happen. What's your advice for somebody who loves this as a career and wants to do it as a career? What's the best way to approach that in a way that's going to make that viable and have legs and longevity?

53:52

Liz: I think that you need to understand you're not alone, that we all have experience that, you know, is interesting. I'll just say this. And this is a perfect example of why you just have to keep hope. A lot of people were messaging us with very specific things that had gone on and then Steven Rowley and Brenda Janowitz actually put it in their story and tagged us. And so I went in and just said, "Hey, other successful authors, this is really important. We've heard from all of you; why don't you share your experience and tag us?"

Nobody did. Now we have and that's totally fine. But here is my point: We heard all the stories. We got calls, texts, emails, Facebook Messenger, and of course we would never share any of those things, right? But they still—for probably a myriad of reasons and I don't know why—were uncomfortable sharing that publicly.

So to aspiring authors or authors who aren't where you want to be at, we will tell you that some of your favorite authors are experiencing the same things as you, and they're not going to show you because

they've got to protect themselves and their contracts and those things, and there's nothing wrong with that. But they are going through it—I promise you they are. So just keep going. And, you know, to Lisa's point, find the joy. So that's my two cents.

Lisa: I love that. Yeah, I completely agree with that. And then also, just remember the part about this is just a business. And it's like anything, it's like when you're going on job interviews and you don't get the job, well, maybe you didn't have...maybe it was timing, maybe it was what you were wearing, who knows what it was. It's just a business. It's not personal. And you have to know that. And just remember that, because if you get too personal with it—which I know is hard, because it's your baby; you're literally putting it out and hoping somebody is gonna love it as much as you do—that's just not how it's going to go. So if you can take on that mindset a little bit more and separate those two things, I just think you'll have a better chance at surviving and feeling better.

And knowing that, you know—again, to Liz's point—that you're not alone. That everyone's been rejected—you're not going to find an author out there who hasn't had a rejection at some point. Or at any point in their career. I just don't think so. I don't think there's anybody that's probably ever come out of the gate, debut book, hit, went on never had an issue.

TYM: And if there are I hate them.

Lisa: Yeah. Actually, the people you can hate, we're allowed to hate that person. But like, JK Rowling had like a million rejections. You know, there's the stories...and I know that can be hard to think, “Oh, but look at her now.” But you just have to remember that it's just a business.

56:59

TYM: Yeah. And think about where you want to be. Like the JK Rowling thing—you know, I used to be an actor and I quit acting. I was really unhappy and didn't know why and my way is to sort of Rolodex through everything going on and decide, Okay, is it this? Is it this? is it this? And I got to thinking, Should I quit acting? And I started smiling and I couldn't stop. I asked myself the question, If I succeed in this as wildly as it's possible to succeed, do I want that thing? And I thought about what that would look like: the loss of privacy, the loss of loss of anonymity, that constant needing to prove yourself, the worrying about, “Oh, how am I aging? Am I still getting the roles?” And I thought, I don't want that. So I love what you said, Lisa, just about sort of...think about even the people who you're holding up as a success, think about what that actually means. And is that a thing you want?

57:52

Lisa: True.

Liz: Right.

TYM: In her case? Probably. Yes. We all do want that.

57:58

Lisa: All right. Yeah. I mean, it's just that success is great. But especially when you're creative and you're public, you're really opening yourself up to, you know, a lot of different stuff, so.

TYM: And you might get locked into a groove. I mean, Stephen King has tried to write other things outside of his genre, and some of it hits and some of it doesn't. Doesn't matter who you are. So you guys have been, again, so incredibly generous with your time and your insights. Thank you for that.