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NB: The Literary Consultancy’s Being a Writer podcast was recorded today at Clean Prose, London’s first co-working space for writers at 2 Charlotte Road in Shoreditch. Visit [www.cleanprose.co.uk](http://www.cleanprose.co.uk) to book a free trial today.\*  
  
*\*EDITOR’S NOTE: Sadly Clean Prose shut down as a result of the pandemic, but we will keep an eye out for other similar offers for writers.*

Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast—a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. As part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of guiding literary creativity, each edition will explore what it means to be a writer today. I’m Nelima, editorial and marketing assistant from TLC, and this time we’re joined by literary agent and author, Catherine Cho.

As a literary agent, Catherine joined the Madeleine Milburn Literary Agency in 2019, and specialised in adult fiction and non-fiction. Catherine studied English at New York University and received a JD from the University of Hong Kong. After leaving a career in law and public affairs, Catherine began her publishing career at Folio Literary Management in New York, as a contracts manager and literary assistant.

She then moved to Curtis Brown in London, as an assistant to Jonny Geller, where she worked with clients such as John le Carré, Nigella Lawson and David Nicholls. She was promoted to associate agent in 2018, building a list of reading group fiction and non-fiction. Now at Madeleine Milburn, she is also the digital rights manager, overseeing digital strategy at the agency. As an author, her debut memoir, *Inferno* was published by Bloomsbury in March 2020, and explores the powerful subject of psychosis and motherhood. It’s a deeply personal story, that examines universal aspects of being a mother, and has been described by Harper’s Bazaar as a brave, brilliant exploration of madness and motherhood. We’re delighted to have her here to explore the topic of how to deal with rejection.

Rejection is not a nice topic, but hopefully we’ll be able to shed some more light on it today. As an agent, and now a published author, you have a pretty thorough understanding of the topic, having seen it from both sides. Are there any similarities or differences that you notice?

CC [00:02:11]: I think that, from a writer’s perspective, rejection ultimately feels incredibly personal. As an agent, we face rejection all the time. I think, for a writer, what I’ve learned from my experience, is that you are in a very vulnerable position. And so, ultimately, rejection of your writing feels like rejection of yourself.

NB [00:02:35]: In your experience, because of the sheer volume of submission s that agents get through the day, it’s obviously quite standard to send out one rejection to everyone, just a template message. But what are the most common reasons for a manuscript not getting picked up? I feel like that would be useful.

CC [00:03:02]: Definitely. I think the vast majority of manuscripts that come in, we find that the work is not compelling enough. I think that could mean anything, from having a very compelling storyline, to having compelling characters. But I think, often, we see this from the pitch or from the opening chapters, there’s not a sense of narrative urgency. And I would say that’s probably true for 80% of manuscripts that come in. And when you have that, that just means that there’s not really much that an agent can work with editorially, if the idea isn’t compelling.

NB [00:03:46]: Okay. What are your coping mechanisms for dealing with rejection? Is there a particular thing, or process, that helps you see it through?

CC [00:03:53]: Well, as an agent, when work is rejected, I tend to think about why that happened. I tend to look at it very analytically, and from a distanced point of view, and how I can make sure that next time that won’t happen. I try to see it as a learning exercise. As a writer, I think the process becomes a bit more personal and that you have to take a step back.

NB [00:04:14]: It’s a lot harder to bounce back from.

CC [00:04:16]: It’s a lot harder to bounce back and remember that it’s not personal and that there’s a reason that it happened. And I also try to see it as a learning exercise as well, I think, just to recognise why maybe something was rejected. Yes, of course my work was non-fiction, so in a way, I think with fiction it’s so much more of a creation that you have. With non-fiction, I mean there’s only so much I could have said about an experience because that is what happened. But I do think taking a step back when you get a rejection letter or email, and just trying to see the reasons why and how you can move on from it.

NB [00:05:05]: What do you recommend a writer does, when they get rejected? Do you have a series of steps that you would ask them to follow, or expect them to follow? Just tips and tricks.

CC [00:05:22]: I think, for a writer, when you’re rejected, the best thing to do is to see how you can take that rejection and make your work better. And I think that means taking a step back, looking at your pitch, looking at the opening chapters, and just think why did that not catch an agent’s attention? I see this all the time with published writers. They will often say that their work was rejected countless numbers of times, and the reason that they were able to then get published is that they used that to then improve their work. Maybe it means moving on to the next idea, but I think, as a writer, you just have to look forward and keep going.

NB [00:06:07]: I think you were saying earlier that it’s every writer. Every writer has been rejected at some point or another.

CC [00:06:14]: Definitely. I think, unfortunately, for anyone in a creative profession, particularly writers, you will get rejected. And that can be at every stage, whether it’s at the beginning when you’re trying to find an agent, then when you’re trying to find a publisher and finally readers will reject you. Reviewers will reject you. It’s just, unfortunately, part of the experience.

NB [00:06:37]: So, going back to what you said earlier about not to take it personally, it’s really easy, as an author, and for anyone for that matter, especially you because you’ve written a memoir which is so deeply personal, it can be very easy to take it personally, and maybe not think of it as a rejection of your work as such, but more so of you.

CC [00:06:56]: Yes.

NB [00:06:57]: So what would you advise writers do, in terms of separating themselves from their work?

CC [00:07:04]: I mean obviously it’s very difficult, and I think it just takes time, and there will always be a sting, I think, even if you try to not feel that. But it’s just to take a breath, physically, and remind yourself that it isn’t personal, as much as it feels personal. Take a breath, maybe let yourself feel upset about it for a limited period of time, whether it’s an hour or a day, and then move on.

NB [00:07:36]: Could we talk about your own process as an author? Just how you’ve gone through it all. What was the process for you, in terms of finding an agent and getting your work out there?

CC [00:07:47]: Yeah, well I guess obviously, for me, because I am in the industry, that did help me in that I knew kind of how competitive it is, but also I knew how to construct my pitch letter, I knew how to construct the pitch itself, and also I knew the agent that I wanted. So, I had a definite advantage, in that I knew who I wanted to approach. My agent is Sophie Lambert at C&W, and she has an incredible list of memoir, including Christie Watson, and also mental health, Nathan Filer, for example. And she’s a mother herself, so all those elements were things that I knew that I wanted her to be my agent. And so, in that sense, I didn’t have to do a huge round of submissions. I approached her directly, with my submission, and I do think it helped in that obviously because she was somebody I knew, she had to read what I wrote. But, you know, in our initial meeting, she was very clear with me that it would be difficult to find a publisher, and we worked a lot on it, editorially, for six months after that process, to really change the narrative and find a way to make it feel more universal. And, as much as it did help me to find an agent, I don’t think my being in the industry necessarily helped it get that publishing deal.

NB [00:09:15]: Because that would be a common misconception. Because you’re in the industry already, it must have been handed to you. But that’s not the case at all.

CC [00:09:21]: No. We were rejected from many people. Many publishers, you know. And I think because I know the process, it felt much more, kind of, I guess raw, in a way, because I knew what kind of discussions were being had. Discussions about sales, discussions about marketing. I knew that those discussions were being had, but we were very lucky, ultimately, that we had six publishers, in the end, who gave offers, and we met with each of them, ultimately, and we chose Bloomsbury. But yeah, so going through that process, I was surprised, actually, at how much I learned from it, just because I thought I had a really good understanding of what it would feel like, but actually, being on the other side, I think really showed me how vulnerable it is as a writer, and how much you do end up relying on your agent, because I really relied on Sophie to tell me what was happening communicate with me, to share the notes, and also, just from the beginning, with the editorial process she completely helped me deconstruct the narrative and put it back together. That really was just me listening to her guidance.

NB [00:10:32]: On that topic, actually, I wanted to ask how heavily involved are you in the editing stage?

CC [00:10:38]: As an agent?

NB [00:10:40]: As an agent. And then as an author.

CC [00:10:41]: I’m a very editorial agent and actually I think most agents these days are, just because it’s so competitive, and editors are really expecting a higher level of work. And I know it’s something that we do often at Madeleine Milburn as well, is that we do several rounds of edits, and for me, it’s part of the process that I really enjoy. So I think, for the vast majority of my authors, we will do at least two or three significant edits.

NB [00:11:14]: And as an author, what did that look like for you? How many rounds was it?

CC [00:11:18]: It was, I think, three rounds of very, very detailed intensive edits. It was, you know, we completely pulled it apart, put it back together two, three times. And also, I should say, before I submitted to Sophie, I’d already done, maybe, a dozen edits myself, where I’d shared it with other readers, friends, and I took some time away from it. So before I sent it to Sophie, I already thought it was in pretty good shape. And so, yeah I guess just to say that revision and editing is always going to be part of the process.

NB [00:12:01]: Going back to what you said earlier, I think you made a really interesting point about being exposed to the business side of things when pitching your work to agents and everything. Could we go into that a bit more? Because I feel like most authors are unaware that it is also a business decision, as well as liking a story.

CC [00:12:19]: I think it’s interesting because, with books, it is such a subjective thing, whether or not you like a book, whether or not you connect with a story. But ultimately, every publisher is making a business decision.

NB [00:12:33]: Of course, there are a lot of logistics involved.

CC [00:12:35]: Yes. It’s how many books are going to be sold, will they be able to market it properly outside of retailers. There’re a lot of numbers and figures being tossed around in that acquisitions meeting. And I’m not saying a writer should necessarily think about it when they’re writing, I think that’s a mistake, but I think it helps when you’re dealing with rejection, knowing that it’s not necessarily about the work, but it’s about that commercial decision, and how a publisher can bring that work to a wider audience.

NB [00:13:10]: Can you walk us through that process, as an agent, what it’s like to pitch the work to a publisher, because there’s a lot of unseen rejection going on there as well, that I think writers could benefit from understanding.

CC [00:013:23]: Yeah, so any time an agent takes on a writer, we’re automatically thinking where we would position this, what publishers, which editors, so by the time we’re sending it out, we generally have a list, usually we try to think of it as our primary list, a wish list of editors we’d like to see take on the project. We send it to them, and then it’s a waiting game. It’s waiting for the editor to read it, to share it with their editorial team. And then the editor has to pitch it themselves at an acquisitions meeting, which is with a wider team, including their sales department, including the other editors, and really share their vision for it. And then, once they have that, they will let you know whether or not they will be making an offer. Often, editors will share it with their editorial team and then send you a rejection. Or, I think once an editor usually takes it to acquisitions, you pretty much know that you will get an offer, because an editor will only do that if they believe really strongly in the book. But it is true that sometimes I doesn’t go through at acquisitions, so at every stage an agent is receiving some kind of feedback from editors.

NB [00:14:36]: Okay. And how are you processing that?

CC [00:14:40]: I don’t know. I know every agent does it differently. Some agents don’t share that feedback with writers. I tend to be, I personally think, you know I like to know what’s happening. So even if it’s terrible news, I tend to just—

NB [00:14:57]: It’s better to know.

CC [00:14:59]: Yeah I think it’s better to know, and it doesn’t do anyone any favours not to have that, so I always ask writers if they’re happy for me to share the feedback, and then I just send it on. I don’t think it helps anyone to hide the fact that an editor said no I don’t think this is going to work.

NB [00:15:17]: Okay. And after that’s happened, I mean, a lot of, I know the responses vary, but some editors and agents will recommend that you kind of just leave the work for a while. Just step away from it, and then look at it again with a fresh set of eyes. Is that something that you recommend, and if so, how long? What’s a good length of time to leave it?

CC [00:15:37]: I think, when you’ve finished that first draft, you, compulsively, as a writer, just want to share your work because you’re so excited that you’ve finished it, and you’re like I want to send it out to agents, and I want to get that feedback. And if there’s anything to take away from this episode, it’s don’t do that.

NB [00:15:55]: Straight in there with the advice.

CC [00:15:57]: Yeah, it means setting it aside as long as you can, at least a month, I think. Really take some time away from it, because, inevitably, when you look at it with fresh eyes, there’ll be things that you see that you haven’t seen before because you’re so in it. And I’ve heard writers say that they set it aside for three months, six months. Really, as much time as you can take. Because the worst thing you can do is send it out when it’s not ready, and have an agent, an agent is not going to give you feedback most of the time. If you are lucky to get feedback, that’s actually a good sign, but the worst thing is to get that feedback, or rejection, and just think actually I know what could have been done.

NB [00:16:36]: As a writer, did you find support from other writers after being rejected?

CC [00:16:41]: No, I don’t actually know any writers, really. I mean, yeah I think I shared it with friends, and my partner for example. But I don’t really know that many writers. I wasn’t really able to share that experience.

NB [00:16:58]: So where did you find support, then?

CC [00:17:01]: Mostly, I think from myself. I think you have to have that self-belief that, actually, you know, that’s fine. And if this doesn’t work, there’s always going to be something else. And, also, I’m very lucky in that my partner was very supportive, and he’s an academic so he faces rejection all the time.

NB [00:17:20]: That’s brutal.

CC [00:17:21]: It’s very brutal. He is constantly sending out grants, presenting his work to, you know, the European Research Council and being told no all the time. So actually, if anything, academics face way more rejection than writers do, and they’re very good at dealing with it. And so, he will always give me a lot of good advice.

NB [00:17:37]: to walk you through the process?

CC [00:17:38]: Yeah.

NB [00:17:40]: Are there any resources in particular, or any groups or anything, that you would recommend, in this instance, in terms of getting other people to read your work? Because I family and friends are a go-to. Some writers find it really useful and others don’t, because they’ll be so proud that you’ve written something to begin with.

CC [00:17:59]: Yeah, it’s so hard because I do think writers will often share their work with friends and family, and I often see, in cover letters, people saying all my friends have said they couldn’t put it down and just think it should be published. And that’s really lovely, but, unfortunately, a friend or family members is not going to be able to give you honest advice, no matter how honest they say that they will be. They just can’t. Because they have a connection to you. They know how much the work means to you. They cannot give you a distanced response. And they’re reading a work wanting to like it, whereas an agent is going to read it, or an editor is going to read it, looking for reasons to be persuaded to like it. That’s a very different perspective.

NB [00:18:43]: I think it’s a crucial difference to understand.

CC [00:18:46]: It’s a crucial difference. Somebody who knows you is going to read your work wanting to read on. An agent is going to, more than often, you know, more often than not, is reading a work looking for a reason to put it down. So it’s a crucial distinction. That being said, I think it’s really important for writers to have writers’ groups, whether it’s with organisations like TLC, or places like Reddit, where they have beta readers. They’re definitely forums online where people share their work, and to find somebody who is as much of a stranger to you as possible is the most helpful.

NB [00:19:19]: Okay. As an agent, how much of your time do you spend helping your writers through the submission and rejection process? How heavily involved are you at that point?

CC [00:19:29]: You mean in terms of when I’m submitting it to publishers?

NB [00:19:31]: Yes, and after, if it has been rejected.

CC [00:19:36]: It’s really tough. I tend to try to be as upbeat as possible. Every agent, when they send out projects, even if they don’t want to admit it, every agent sends out projects that don’t sell, no matter how established you are. But definitely, starting out, it feels way more daunting. But I tend to ask the writer, actually even before we start submitting, I ask the writer to start thinking about the next project, because I say, you know, even though I think it has a really great chance of finding a publishing, there’s no guarantee. So what will help you is to already have in mind what will happen next. What can you write next. And so that’s something I definitely do with writers.

NB [00:20:25]: So thinking about next steps is always a good way to go?

CC [00:20:28]: Yes. I think if you have the next project in mind already, then it doesn’t make you feel like this is everything I have, and it’s just been rejected.

NB [00:20:38]: A lot of time that can happen, where everyone banks on one particular manuscript, or puts all their eggs in one basket. So it’s always good to have a backup plan.

CC [00:20:44]: Yes, definitely.

NB [00:20:46]: What’s the best way to approach your work again, in a way that’s productive and geared towards the development of the manuscript as well as the writer. Because, obviously, you have to build up confidence again, and that can be a really difficult thing to do.

CC [00:21:00]: Yes. I think most writers will be facing rejection from the early agent stage, so I think that just means taking a look back at the central message, or the central plot, of your story. Whether it’s the characters or it’s the narrative, and just think how can I make this more exciting. Are there more layers that I can add? Is there more conflict I can add? And usually, the vast majority of the time, you can always add more conflict. Whether that means a personal conflict, whether that means external with your characters, there’s always a way of really heightening the stakes. And also think about, has your story started in the right pace? Because often agents are looking at the opening chapters, and I would say a lot of the time, for beginner writers, the story does not start in the right place. And so maybe take a look at that opening chapter and just think, if I had no idea what this book was about, would I want to keep reading on?

NB [00:22:03]: So those first two to three chapters?

CC [00:22:05]: Are really key. And, you know, of course there are many books that are slow burners at the beginning, and there’re so many examples I can think of. But, at the same time, I think, for a debut writer, those opening chapters are really important.

NB [00:22:25]: I think the last time we spoke, you had a brilliant Star Wars example.

CC [00:22:27]: Oh yeah. Star Wars is great.

NB [00:22:29]: Which I really enjoyed. Do you want to share?

CC [00:22:32]: Yeah, well I use that as an example of narrative conflict, which is about Luke Skywalker, one man against the galaxy. That’s compelling, but what makes it even more compelling is that the man he has to face, the evil force, is his father, that he never knew, in his entire life. His entire family has been killed at the very beginning. His aunt and uncle have been killed. That creates such narrative urgency, and so much conflict, more so than just an anonymous person who has to face the dark side. It’s so much more compelling that it’s his father that he’s yearned for his entire life, who’s saying join me. You know, that’s really a great example of storytelling.

NB [00:23:09]: I love how passionate you are about Star Wars.

CC [00:22:12]: Totally. It’s such a great example of narrative conflict. There are so many examples, but I think of a show like Mad Men, which is exciting in itself, it’s about an ad agency, Don Draper is this ad man, but what’s also really compelling is that he himself is creating his own brand. Because he actually has this hidden life, this hidden past. He’s not himself, so he is the living embodiment of an ad. So you know, those are the layers that really make a story compelling.

NB [00:23:45]: Going back to your experience as a writer, and seeing the process form the other side, as you were writing a personal memoir, did you ever have to try and detach yourself from the writing during the submission process, and was that difficult for you?

CC [00:23:58]: Yes, I think when I sat down to write the memoir, I had already kind of reminded myself I’m going to approach it as a narrative, and much more form a clinical point of view. I don’t think I could have written a compelling narrative if I was still processing all the emotions from my experience. So, by the time I was looking at the narrative I tried to put it together in as much of a clinical way as possible. Yes, of course it was really difficult during the submissions process, hearing somebody saying, you know, nothing personal at all, but just to say I don’t think this story would really appeal to the general public. And people said that, and, you know, of course that’s my story.

NB [00:24:45]: It’d be hard not to take it personally.

CC [00:24:49]: I didn’t take it personally, because I think I knew, going in, not everyone is going to find a story of one person’s experience with mental health, or motherhood, necessarily universal. But that was something that I really tried to do when I was writing it.

NB [00:25:05]: Last time we spoke we also talked about rejection from readers once you’ve been published, which is something a lot of writers aren’t aware of.

CC [00:25:14]: Yeah, readers are brutal. They’re really harsh, and they tag you in their comments, which, as a reader, really? Don’t do that.

NB [00:25:24]: If you don’t like it just leave it be.

CC [00:25:26]: Yeah. And I think that’s an experience that maybe, if you’re a debut writer, you’re not necessarily prepared for, because you’re so excited that you’ve got to this point of being published which is so incredible and such an incredible achievement.

NB [00:25:36]: It’s a huge milestone.

CC [00:25:38]: Huge Milestone. And then to get, you know, reviews saying this was one of the worst books I’ve ever reader, or I hated this book so much, or couldn’t wait to put it down, or such a disappointment, wish I could get a refund. And those are all words people say without realising there’s a writer behind this. There’s years of writing behind a book. And even for me, I don’t look at reviews, and I know, I’ve seen just from what my partner’s told me, there are two star, one star reviews on Goodreads, and, you know, you can’t take it personally.

NB [00:26:12]: At least he’s guiding you through.

CC [00:26:14]: Yeah exactly. He’s reading them for me!

NB [00:26:17]: Do you think rejection gets easier for writers, as they get more experienced? Because it’s a character-building thing.

CC [00:26:24]: It’s a character-building thing. I think, was it Stephen King who said that when he was starting out he had a nail on his wall, and he just kind of slammed all the rejection slips against this nail until it was completely full. But, I actually think that even the most established writers that we’ve worked with, definitely, they still feel the sting of rejection. I think it becomes something that you’re better at handling more quickly, but I don’t think it ever becomes something you can completely set aside, especially because writers tend to be very sensitive, empathetic people. And so, even if you’re a hugely established, bestselling author, that one negative rejection or review can really leave a mark.

NB [00:27:10]: Set you back emotionally, as well.

CC [00:27:11]: Yeah, and I think people forget that. They think a very established writer isn’t going to care about one opinion, but actually, I’m sure most of the time, they do.

NB [00:27:25]: Does the thought of rejection ever affect the writing process? Because, obviously, it can cast a shadow over the writing itself, at times.

CC [00:27:31]: Yeah, I think this is something writers will definitely have to think about, which is when you’re writing your book, I think it’s best to ignore the outside world as much as possible. Don’t think about the publishing process. Don’t think about the agents or the editors. Don’t think about the readers. I think you have to make sure the book stands on its own. And so, really being able to drown out all the voices, because there will already be voices of doubt that, you know each step of the way, for a writer it’s up and down. One minute you’re feeling like you’re really on top of it, and the next you’re feeling that this is the worst thing ever. So yeah, I think you just can’t think about those things when you’re writing. It’s when you go back and edit, that’s when you can start thinking about what might make somebody not like this, what might make somebody not take this one. But when you’re in that initial stage, you just have to listen to your own voice, as a writer, and trust in your own ability to tell a story.

NB [00:28:29]: To have conviction in your work.

CC [00:28:31]: To have conviction in your work. You have to have conviction.

NB [00:28:35]: You have to champion it first.

CC [00:28:36]: Yes. You’re the one who has to champion it first when you’re sending it out. You have to be your one, true believer.

NB [00:28:45]: That’s a lovely way of putting it, as well. Going back to what you just said about when you go back to editing, that’s when you go and peel it back. What did that look like for you?

CC [00:28:52]: Yeah, I think, for me, again because it was a memoir, I knew there were only so many, I had to follow what happens, so I couldn’t create a whole world. But I changed the structure a lot, I really changed the parts that I was emphasising, I changed where the book began. There were so many things that I changed, and kind of, you know, put it back together. I really tried not to feel precious about anything, and there were many things that I cut that I felt, I can’t cut that, that needs to be there. But actually, you just have to be ruthless. And for me, the challenge was, and I think that is true for any memoir writer, is how can you make this personal story have a universal resonance. And so, I was looking at it from a very analytical eye in terms of how can someone who doesn’t know me, who doesn’t really care, or has a reason to care, how can they care about this story?

NB [00:29:54]: And I think that’s something you brought up in our last conversation. You said you have to make people care. Make people want to read your work.

CC [00:30:01]: Yeah, I think that’s really true. I mean, that’s such a harsh thing to say. Why should someone care about this story? But you know, it’s a huge commitment to read a book, it’s a time commitment, so, as a writer, once you’re in that editing stage you have to think about why would the average person off the street want to read this? What are they going to get from it? Whether it’s entertainment, whether it’s a message, they need to care.

NB [00:30:25]: it goes back to your first point of making the story as compelling as possible. How important do you think it is to find an agent that believes in the writing as much as you do?

CC [00:30:36]: That is really key, because an agent is going to be your champion, and your advocate. An agent, and I think this is something I mentioned before, their role is not to publish your book, or to find a publisher for a writer. I think that’s a distinction. An agent’s job is to advocate for the clients that they have. That’s why, you know, as frustrating as it is that agents might not give you a response or personalised rejection, it’s because they are focusing on their existing clients. And it’s going to be an agent who is the one who keeps sending out your work, who keeps talking about your work to people, who really has to believe in it 100%, because your success is going to be aligned with an agent’s success. Agents know this. We don’t get paid unless our authors get paid. That makes it sound very commercial, but it’s really true.

NB [00:31:36]: It goes back to that business angle thing.

CC [00:31:38]: Yeah, business angle. And, you know, as an agent, a lot of the time the books that we take on, it’s because that we really believe passionately that this is something that, not just from a commercial point of view, something that we think readers will want to read. It’s so rewarding when somebody you really believe in, and can champion, finds that readership, finds that success. It’s a really incredible feeling.

NB [00:32:02]: I think it’s a common misconception that agents are just gatekeepers, when in fact they do want to believe in your work and be passionate about your work and champion it to everyone that they can.

CC [00:32:11]: Yeah, I mean we don’t take any joy from saying no to people. And I think there’s this misconception that agents are just like haha no you can’t get in, no we’re not going to publish you. And it’s a really sad part of the model that we can’t give feedback in that sense, but really it comes down to time. We get hundreds of submissions a week and we don’t read our submissions during office hours as much as we would like to. Its outside of office hours.

NB [00:32:42]: It’s your own personal time you’re putting into each submission.

CC [00:32:44]: It’s our own personal time, yeah. And we want to find the, you know, I sometimes think of it as somebody on the gold rush. We’re trying to find that exciting story. It’s such an exciting feeling, a rush, when you find that book where you’re like oh my goodness, I really love this and I know how to work on it. That’s what we’re looking for.

NB [00:33:07]: How does it feel as an agent when a writer who has experienced rejection multiple times finds success, and do you have examples of these success stories? It’s always good to get people going, and it will happen eventually.

CC [00:33:14]: There are so many examples, and I think writers will say well look at JK Rowling, she was rejected, which is true, yes she was, although not as much as people would think, actually, if you look at the numbers. Someone like Kathryn Stockett, who wrote *The Help*, I think she amassed over 60, 70 rejections from agents. It was one agent who picked it up, who I think she said was her 70th submission, and that agent is the one who found her an editor. And then there is Dilly Court, who writes sagas. She had an agent, after multiple rejections, but actually she had 12 novels on submission that were rejected at the editorial stage. Imagine having written your novel, 12 novels, and it was your 13th novel that found an editor and became a Sunday Times bestseller. But she said that, at every stage, whether at first she was just getting blank rejections from agents, then she was getting personalised rejections from agents, then she found an agent, then she found an editor, you know, ultimately, after the 12 novels, but she said at each point, she used that to prove what she was doing. And I think that is really key, is that rather than just saying everyone’s against me, how can you take that to think why is that happening, and how you can improve.

NB [00:34:43]: It’s great to know that I is something to take in your stride. And to know that there are authors that are very successful who’ve gone through it, and the sheer numbers. 70 rejections is wild.

CC [00:34:56]: It is wild. You just have to keep going.

NB [00:34:59]: How important is it for writers to define success for themselves?

CC [00:35:04]: That’s a great question, because, as a writer, I think there are so many stages. First you think I will feel great if I finish a novel. Then it’s I will feel great if I find an agent. Then it’s I’ll feel great if it gets published. Then it’s oh, I need a six-figure advance. Then it’s I need to be a lead debut. I really need to sell x number of copies. And at every stage, unless you set a bar for yourself that says actually, I’m going to be happy at this point, there’s always going to be something bigger at the next stage, oh I want to be on the Sunday Times bestseller list, I want to write my next book and make sure it hits that figure as well. You can reach a point where you’re never satisfied, and, as a writer, I think you just have to kind of, in order to feel calm, and sort of level headed, you have to find that measure of success for yourself, because for everyone it’s going to be different.

NB [00:36:04]: It’s not linear.

CC [00:36:06]: It’s not linear. And there are people who get amazing reviews, amazing endorsements, amazing prizes, but they don’t necessarily sell. And there’re going to be people who sell huge numbers of books, then don’t get the reviews and don’t get the prizes. There are really different indications of success.

NB [00:36:23]: It means something different to every person.

CC [00:36:25]: It does, yeah.

NB [00:36:27]: When you were starting out, and when you were writing your books, did you have milestones in your head that you wanted to reach? Did you have targets and numbers? Because it’s really easy to fall into that.

CC [00:36:40]: Firstly, and I know this from a personal level, I would be very pleased with myself if I could write a book because I had never done that before. If I write 65,000 words and it’s legible, and readable, I’ll feel great. But then of course I was like well I need to get an agent. And I need to get published. And then I was like okay I need to stop there. So actually, for me, I said to myself if I find a US publisher and a UK publisher, I am going to feel good. And, actually, I’ve really kept true to that. Everything else I’ve really tried to distance myself in terms of just seeing it as a bonus.

NB [00:37:19]: Did you have any points throughout the writing process, or the submission process even, where you maybe had doubts, or weren’t feeling as great about it?

CC [00:37:30]: I mean definitely, during the writing process. I wrote it very quickly and there were times where I just thought is this really going to work? In the editorial process, when I was working with my agent, when I was facing yet another edit, after thinking I’ve really nailed it on the head, it was really daunting, and I just didn’t know how I was going to keep pushing myself. But you just have to keep pushing. There were definitely points where I felt like this is just not going to work out.

NB [00:38:04]: I also wanted to ask, when you’re working with your agent, are there times when perhaps you don’t see eye to eye? And that’s true for any writer; writers that you’ve working with as well.

CC [00:38:13]: I think that part of when you make that decision, when you are signing on with an agent, is to make sure that the vision is aligned. And I knew that with Sophie, when she met me and we talked about it. Our visions were aligned, and also, you have to trust your agent, so I really trusted her, and in terms of anything she said, I really just took it on board, because I knew that she had the vision for it that I might not have had as the writer. I think for the vast majority of cases, when a writer and agent first meet, they will talk about that vision for the book, and that is really important because somebody can say to you actually I see this more as a thriller, when actually you envisioned it as a quite literary novel. It’s really important to find an agent who shred that same vision as you do.

NB [00:39:08]: Have you had a writer where, perhaps, they were rejected and they went away and worked on their novel and came back you saw a massive difference, and you felt that this time it was right? Was there anything that they went away and did, that stands out to you?

CC [00:39:25]: Yeah, we’ve definitely seen that. I think one of the key things is time. Usually, when a writer comes back and says I can fix this in a week, please give me another chance, I tend to say no, I’m not going to read this again because I don’t care how fast you are as a writer, a week is not enough time. It tends to be that a writer will go away for six months, to a year, and completely overhaul the book.

NB [00:39:49]: So just pick it apart in time?

CC [00:39:51]: Pick it apart. Usually what it is, is that the writing is good, it just comes back to that compelling storyline, and it’s whether it’s really streamlining the story so that it’s more focused on characters, whether it’s starting the book in a different place. I think those are the times that we see, oh actually this really could work.

NB [00:40:13]: Do you have any quickfire tips and tricks, or tidbits of advice for writers, during that submission process? Because it is quite a lengthy journey. Obviously they’ve done the main part, they’ve written the book but getting it out there, that’s quite the process. Is there anything that you’d recommend or say that would see them through the whole thing? Because it’s quite a daunting journey at times.

CC [00:40:37]: I guess the main thing is to really do your research. There’s no point sending your novel to an agent who doesn’t represent the type of book that you write.

NB [00:40:48]: And it can be tempting to just get it out everyone, and see where you strike lucky.

CC [00:40:51]: Yeah. I have a curated list: don’t send to agents one at a time. No agent really expects to have an exclusive submission. It’s about, at the beginning of the submission journey, making sure that your package, in terms of the opening chapters, the synopsis, that pitch letter, is really as polished as possible. You have to see it as, and this is really difficult, I know, for writers, in that it’s a professional pitch document. There’s no self-deprecating language. It’s really polished. It’s really honed. It’s really clear to the agent what the book is about, because it’s that gut instinct. We’re going to look at the cover letter and hopefully think wow, yes, I have to read this now. That’s the feeling you want to get form an agent. Then, in terms of logistics, send it out widely, but make sure you tailor your letter to every agent, even if it means a couple of sentences. Don’t say dear sir, dear madam. Especially don’t say dear sir if the agent is a woman, because that’s very frustrating.

NB [00:42:07]: And very common.

CC [00:42:09]: And very common. It really doesn’t take that much time just to say one or two sentences about why you’ve chosen that agent. That shows that agent that you’ve thought about it. Whether it’s I have chosen you because you say you want to represent this, or I have chosen you because you represent this author and she’s one of my favourites. Then, I think, an agent will take it seriously. Another thing is no apologising in your cover letter. Every agent wants to find great work, so there’s no need to say I’m not sure if this is any good, or I know you’re really busy but I just wanted to see if this might, you know. Be confident, and see it as a sales pitch, which is what it is.

NB [00:42:51]: You are selling yourself, essentially.

CC [00:42:53]: You are selling yourself. And you’re selling your story, so have that really good, compressed two sentence description of your book that describes what your book is about. And I think if you have that, that’s usually a good indicator that your story is compelling. If you’re really struggling with telling somebody what your book is about in a couple of sentences, then maybe you have to think again. Agents often ask, what’s your book about? And a writer usually tends to struggle. It has these themes; it has this and that, and this happens. You really want to boil down your story into a couple of lines, and if you can that usually means it has a very compelling heart. It has an emotional heart at the centre of it. And that’s really what every agent is looking for, even if it’s a really experimental novel with experimental language. Even if it’s a book where not much happens. You’re still looking for that emotional pull, and that’s universal all novels.

NB [00:44:11]: And it will drive your story forward, as well.

CC [00:44:13]: Yeah. It’ll have the narrative urgency. It’ll have that momentum. You can’t really have a book just on language, I don’t think.

NB [00:44:20]: I actually wanted to ask, very quickly, is there anything you wish more writers knew about the process, or the industry, as a whole? Something you wish they had more of an understanding of? Because a lot of writers go into it kind of blind, not really knowing what goes on behind the scenes with agents and publishers and that relationship as a whole.

CC [00:44:42]: I guess I wish that writers would know that agents aren’t gatekeepers and that there are, actually, so many people writing. Everyday I’m surprised at how many people have written a novel and sent it to an agent. It’s really incredible, and I think if you know just how many people are doing it and what you have to do to stand out and approach it as a craft, then I think that will give you a huge advantage. If you approach your work as a craft, something that you will improve, something you will master, then your book will find a readership. I definitely think that.

NB [00:45:25]: Do you have any final thoughts or last-minute tips on rejection, and getting back on the horse?

CC [00:45:30]: I guess what I hope everyone takes away from his is that rejection happens to everybody. It’s not personal. You can only use it to make yourself stronger, and a better writer. Every writer, no matter who they are and in what stage of their career, can improve. Of course you need the conviction and the confidence, but you also have to have an open mind and think how can I become a better writer? How can I write a more compelling story? When you think that way, when you approach it that way, you will then be able to reach a stage where you can have a book that readers will want to read.

NB [00:46:10]: That’s brilliant. Thank you so much for joining us.

CC [00:46:12]: Thanks so much for having me.

NB [00:46:14]: We’ve learned a lot. Catherine’s memoir is out now, so I advise everyone go pick up a copy because it’s absolutely wonderful, very thought provoking. Thank you for being with us.