



Jessi Honard & Marie Parks

408: Using the “Loop Method” to Co-Write Your Novel, an Inside Look at the Writing Process

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I’m Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let’s talk writing.

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Now, today, I have the extra special pleasure of interviewing Jessi Honard and Marie Parks. Jessi and Marie have been co-writing speculative fiction since 2009; and their 2022 contemporary fantasy debut, *Unrelenting*, was a finalist in the 2020 Book Pipeline Unpublished Manuscript contest.

Marie is a fantasy, sci-fi, and horror author who landed in New Mexico after traveling full-time in an RV for years. Her writing uses speculative fiction to dive into topics like social justice, the environment, and the power of friendship.

Jessi is a speculative fiction author, business owner, and professional coffee inhaler, right there with you. Her work leans into the power of imaginary worlds as a conduit for exploring common struggles of identity, belonging, and trust.

Together, they’ve been running a successful copywriting agency since 2010. Jessi lives in the Bay Area of California with her partner, Taormina; and Marie lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with all the dogs.

Welcome Jessi and Marie. It is so great to have you here today.

Marie Parks: Thank you so much; and yes, hopefully, all the dogs stay quiet for this interview.

GP: Oh, if there’s noise from the dogs – you know, your dogs, my cat – it’s all good. So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story, but before we get to that, I kind of want to know the story behind the collaboration. How did you ladies start working together, like in business and then co-writing fiction? Like that’s not typical of a lot of fiction co-writers, so how did this start?

Jessi Honard: Yeah, so, to answer that, we have to nerd out to an extreme level. We first started writing fiction together, and then started a business together. And the way we initially started



writing fiction together was where we met, which was a forum for fans of the Children's book series Animorphs that came out in the 90s.

If you remember that series, that was something that both Marie and I grew up on; loved, adored as kids, and then wanted to talk about online. And so, we found each other on an Animorphs forum where there was a role-playing area, where you could just write collaborative stories together on the forum.

And that's how we initially met. And we realized we lived in the same city – at the time – decided to meet up in person and started a friendship that turned into collaborative fiction writing in our own worlds; and also, eventually starting a business as well.

GP: I love that. And I have to say like, isn't that such a thing of the 90s? Like as a teenager of the 90s myself, like you know, back then it was totally normal and okay to make friends online and then meet them in real life and people wouldn't go, 'Ooh, that's dangerous and creepy.' Now, it's like my children mention like, 'Oh, I'm friends with so-and-so on Minecraft.' And I'm like, 'Aha! No, you're not.' But isn't that like a total 90s thing? Right?

MP: Yeah, for sure. I actually remember the first time I went to meet Jessi in person and meet like-- We did meet at a, you know, mutually public, I guess, space.

[laughter]

MP: We went to like a Panera. [laughs] But I remember like on the way there, I was like, 'Oh yeah, I didn't tell my mom I was doing this. I probably will just tell her afterwards, once I've survived.'

[laughter]

GP: I hear you. One of my earliest DIY MFA team members was also someone that I met, we were blogging buddies. You know, like we read each other's blogs and then ended up collaborating, and she stayed with DIY MFA for years.

So, it's kind of weird how like, it is such a thing of the times that is no longer the case. So, it's kind of funny. So, let's dive a little bit deeper into this particular book. How did you first get started writing Unrelenting? Like, where did this concept come from?

JH: Yeah, so the very first Seeds of Unrelenting came from one of those collaborative role plays. We were looking for something new, a new world to explore. And this is how we do a lot of our world-building on things we write together is; we open up a Google Doc and we say, "Okay, these are some seeds of ideas that we have; let's assign a couple characters out and start writing and see what happens, see where it goes."

And, like, 90% of the time, it just ends up being something that's for fun for us, for no real end-purpose. But the seeds of this particular story, something about them really took root; and we wanted to continue to elaborate on it, continue to refine it.

And eventually, we reached a point where we were like, 'You know, we think that other people need to know about this world that we're creating, and hear this story.' And so, at that point, we started to look at, how can we take the world that we've developed and the characters that we've developed, and put it into a more cohesive narrative for other people?'



GP: So, I wanted to dive a little deeper into the story of *Unrelenting*, what you mentioned of breaking things down; you know, these characters are my characters, your characters, et cetera.

That's again, very typical of role playing, but this particular story is all Bridget's point of view. It's not like, I can't see the seam between what parts might have been written by each one of you, right?

Like, I can't even begin to guess at them because it's all one character's point of view; it flows from one chapter to the next. Granted, I have only read the beginning portion of it, so maybe things change, but I'm far enough into it that I feel pretty solidly that it's all Bridget's point of view and all pretty much like one cohesive voice.

So, can you talk a little bit about how you made that happen? Because that sounds different from what you were just describing as the early seeds of the story.

MP: Yeah, you're totally right. And part of this, I think is due to the fact that we have, I don't know, was it 12 drafts, by the end of this book, Jessi? [laughs] That we like have gone over it and over and over it. So, part of it is just, you know, you're seeing the finished product, and it's definitely morphed over the course of writing it.

But part of it too is when we made that shift from, 'Okay, this is like a collaborative role play type writing' – into 'Okay, no, we want this to be more in like a traditional novel format,' that is where we shifted the way we were writing it; that we both took ownership of all of the characters.

And characters that previously one of us had had, we just kind of pulled back the curtain for the other person and said, "These were some of the backstory ideas that I was thinking about." And then, we would collaboratively massage those so that we had a better understanding together, and that it fit with the themes that were starting to develop within the story and the character arcs and all the magic.

So yeah, we had to have those conversations about a shared vision for the story in order to make that happen. And then, I think we could probably also talk about our actual writing process in terms of that seamlessness; and thank you, for that compliment. But I think that's part of that is also like the way that we co-write.

GP: I love that, and we need to get into that. But before we do, I wanted to mention like, you know, we have had co-author duos on the show in the past, and their process – at least the ones that I'm thinking of off the top of my head – it was very much, you know, there's multiple point of view story and so Character A belongs to this author, Character B belongs to the other author, and then they just do their chapters and stitch it together. So, let's break down your process for drafting and then revising this book because this is, I think, unique. It's not the typical co-author process.

JH: It's not, and to be honest, it's a little chaotic, if you're looking in at it from the outside. You're right, a lot of times when people are coauthoring, they are pretty established in their own voice; and so, it makes sense to take on a character, and represent that character through the story.

And so, often, you have sort of dual POVs or multiple POVs happening as a result. In our case, and I attribute this partially to the fact that when we started writing *Unrelenting* as a manuscript, we'd already worked together in business for a number of years.

And in our business, we had to create a finished product that represented a single voice rather than two multiple voices. And it had to represent the voice of our client; so, it wasn't even our own voice.

We used those skills to create our writing process for fiction, which I think of as a latter technique or a looping technique that; essentially, we'll open a Google Doc just like when we were role playing, kind of talk about our goals for the writing session.



So, we do all of it live together; and then, one of us will start writing – and we'll just draft, we'll just write until we run out of steam, and the other person will be revising behind that.

And then, if I'm the one writing and I run out of steam, then Marie would jump to the front and she would start writing while I go back and accept her revisions on what I had written, make a few additional revisions and then start revising what she's writing.

And so, we sort of just keep looping until we both run out of steam. And usually that means we've reached a part of the manuscript that we need to talk about in order to know how to move forward.

GP: Oh my gosh, I love that; that is so cool. So, you mentioned like, 'Run out of steam', what does that look like? Because I think a lot of times as writers, we kind of beat ourselves up, right? Like, when we get tired.

And there's that, you know, that sort of 'starving artist' like, 'You have to keep pushing yourself' mentality that I think a lot of us ascribe to – or at least, is in the back of our minds while we're drafting.

So, there's that feeling of like, running out of steam is a bad thing, but in this case, of your process, it's actually like a good thing. It's like you each have each other's backs, and you're sort of allowing the other one to rest so that they can then keep going. So, can you talk a little bit about what it looks like, and how you know when to make that switch?

MP: Yeah, I'll give you my perspective and maybe that Jessi's is different, but I kind of think of it as like a relay race and you're like passing the baton to the next person.

So, sometimes it really is like, 'I legitimately do not know what to write next,' like, I've written myself into a corner, as we all do, but sometimes it's like, 'Okay, I finished that thought and now I need to process it I guess a little bit, so why don't you leap ahead?'

So, it's kind of like, 'Okay, now I've finished my lap, you take the baton, I'm going to like look at this and just sort of think about it.' And so, it's either, yeah, like, 'I don't know how this character would respond in this moment' or 'I don't know how this character would respond in a moment that pushes the plot forward in the way we want it to' or it's, Okay, yeah, that was a cohesive thought and I need to just rest on my laurels for a minute, you take the baton.'

[laughter]

GP: I love that. And you're also sort of intentionally giving yourself those breaks; it's not like you're pushing yourself to the point of exhaustion. At least, not all the time, which I think is also super smart because people often forget writing a novel is a marathon not pace rate.

JH: Which truly is, and I think this is a good thing. There's that added pressure of, we're writing it live together and so we can take the baton from one another, but also it means that if we're sitting down to write together, we have a finite amount of time to get a certain amount of work done and we can't do that again until we meet up together again.

And we're trying and testing out ways of writing together that don't require us both to be together live. But historically, that's what we've done; and historically, that's what's worked. And so, that's why we have that conversation at the beginning where it's like, 'Okay, what are our goals for this session? How close to those goals can we get?'



But it's also why it's so important for one of us to be able to step in while the other is processing or thinking or struggling with a part – passing the baton when I reach a point where I'm like, 'Oh actually this particular thing that we're writing about is something that Marie is better at writing than I am.' So, I'm not even going to try the first pass at it; I'm going to give it over to Marie first, let her take a stab at it, and then I'll come back and add in my flavor.

MP: Oh yeah, we definitely know each other's strengths and our own strengths; and then, the lack through of like, 'You do not want me writing a dream sequence. You just don't, I don't dream that much. I don't know what they look like.'

[laughter]

GP: But that's so great that you know each other so well and know yourselves so well that you're able to, sort of, willingly pass the baton as opposed to, you know, trying to hold the baton and like, 'No, this is my part.'

You know, it's interesting too, as you were talking about writing in real time versus writing asynchronously, it reminds me of back when I would do role playing and whatnot in forums and like, 'Yes, you could leave a part of the story for your character, and then leave and come back the next day.' But it takes so long, like the story doesn't move.

Whereas if both characters or multiple characters in a given scene are all on at the same time and you're all adding your part to the story – that live writing – it moves the scene along a lot more quickly. So, I can see how the role playing would totally lead to this kind of a process of writing in tandem, as it were.

MP: Yeah. You know, it's certainly more efficient at this point for us to write synchronously, but it's also just way more fun because, yeah, when you do run into that like, 'I don't know how this character would respond' or 'Wow, help, my character sounds like a robot,' or this sudden whatever, the thing is like, you have another person to bounce it off of.

And you know, I know a lot of people say like, 'Gosh I could never co-write,' and you know, 'I could co-write, but with a lot of people.'

But when you find somebody who has a similar work ethic and they're like willing to put in that energy for the marathon, a similar vision for the story, and that you're good communicators with each other and you're kind of leaving the ego at the door as far as like what you want to happen and you're willing to kind of explore what the magic you can make together, I think a lot of people could do it.

JH: Yeah, I mean, I'm thinking about how the synchronous writing has been a motivating factor for us. We had gone through several attempts at turning *Unrelenting* into a manuscript, and some of that writing had been asynchronous; and it wasn't really working, and we kind of put it aside for a little while.

And then, we decided to give it another shot, and that was when we really doubled-down on our synchronous writing strategy that worked with a lot of the, you know, non-fiction copywriting work we did.

And we set up, you know, every Thursday is *Unrelenting* day; and we sat down on Thursday from like 9:00 AM until, you know, whenever we were done for the day and managed to get the first real draft of *Unrelenting* out that felt like a complete draft that we had from beginning to end and could feel proud of and send off to beta readers in about 10 months, which was like unheard of based on our previous writing speeds for projects.

So, I think one of the big benefits of our co-writing has been having that trust, having that shared vision, having that communication; but also, being able to motivate each other. You know, when a



Thursday came around, I was like, ‘Ugh, I don’t really feel like writing today.’ She was like, ‘No, come on, we got to do it. We got to make progress, and we’re both in it together.’

GP: Yes.

MP: It’s like having a gym buddy.

GP: And you know, the thing also that occurred to me is that when you have that finite amount of time that you can both be on the document together, that forces you to be productive. You know, it’s that whole idea of, what is it, Parkinson’s Law, that you like only have a fixed amount of time and the project either expands or contracts to fit within that time.

Whereas, you know, how many times have we had our own day of writing open ahead of us, like beautiful green fields and then we get nothing done because it’s the whole day. So yeah, I can see how that would be super motivating as well. Not just the collaboration, the accountability, but also just the finiteness of that time.

MP: Absolutely. The other thing kind of along those lines that was very motivating to us is we went the exact wrong way, about getting this book published. Like, every piece of advice you ever hear, we did not do that; and somehow, it still worked out.

So, I guess, there’s a nugget of hope for people, but one of the things that happened is I pitched this novel that we were, I think, 20,000 words into, at that point, [laughs] at a conference that was here local to me in New Mexico to a local publisher.

And within, I don’t know, a few weeks or something, he got back to me and he is like, ‘Okay, please, send me the first few chapters.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, no problem.’ Sent over the first few chapters and he is like, ‘Okay, I’d like to read the full manuscript,’ and we’re like, ‘There is no full manuscript.’ [laughs]

GP: Oops.

MP: It’s not done. I am so grateful to this wonderful man because he was so gracious when I explained that I had no idea what I was doing and there was no manuscript yet and, how about we get it to you in December? And, we’re still friends and colleagues to this point.

So, I mean, I can’t even express like what a kind, forgiving, professional and person that he is, but like, that deadline of saying, “Okay, we have to get this to him by December, which means we really need to finish it by like October. And that way, we have like a month or two to do some revisions, and maybe see about some beta reading.” That super motivated us having a deadline.

GP: Yeah, I could see how that would definitely be a motivating factor, and I’m so glad that you shared that too. Thank you for sharing that because I think there is this misconception in the writing world and the publishing world – that if you make one mistake, you’re doomed and you’re going to completely ruin all your chances, and it’s over forever and ever.

And like, you know, I’m not encouraging people to go out there and make mistakes on purpose, but there is a way to work your way back from that. And so, I’m glad that you shared an example of a time when that happened for you, and that you were able to preserve the relationship through this person’s kindness. But I’m sure also, through your own graciousness and honesty and being open about what the situation was.

JH: I think one of the things that Marie and I have discovered in the post-writing process – and the publishing, and the pitching, and just getting our work out there – has been the kinds of people we really want to work with.



And you know, there's so much that comes with, so much baggage, I suppose, that comes with the publishing industry and, what directions you want to go? Do you want to self-publish, do you want to traditional, do you want to do this or that? Do you want to get agent or not?

All of it, it feels like there are so many ways to make a wrong decision. And in those early conversations, where we made those early mistakes and subsequent mistakes that have happened-- We've done a lot of things the wrong way and we're still here; and we're still celebrating our debut release.

And we found a publishing house that we adore and that stands for the values that we stand for. And I think all of that kind of came down to us being kind to ourselves when we did kind of realize after the fact, 'Oh whoops, we shouldn't have done it that way, we should have done it this way.'

But also, paying attention to how other people reacted to those missteps and how other people felt about that because if someone acted like, 'Oh, well, your career is over in this industry,' that probably is not someone that we personally want to work with, anyway.

GP: Yes, 100%. And I think that is so important for authors to hear, especially authors who are still working up to their debut because there is, like I said, the mindset that, you know, 'You're one mistake away from completely tanking your career,' which is not true. I did everything completely backwards and wrong as well, in my own unique way.

But the other thing too is this idea of scarcity; that somehow, you know, like we, the writers, are sort of begging at the table for scraps, as it were – and we're not. We're not waiting for publishers and agents to pluck us from obscurity or to like happen to give us an opportunity; like, that's not how it works.

It's not about us being divas either, but it is about us recognizing that we bring a valuable skillset to the table and that we have a seat at that table as well. So, that idea of like, 'Oh, we're just happy to get whatever deal we can get or whatever opportunity we can get,' that is going to run us into trouble every single time. And I know I've often made--

The biggest mistakes I've made have come from that place of fear and scarcity, worrying that, you know, 'If I pass up this so-called 'opportunity', somehow, I'll never get another one,' – and that's not true at all.

MP: Preach, like, yes. [laughs] Yeah, I remember we had an opportunity to chat with an agent who, as it turns out, was wanting to talk with us about a Revise & Resubmit invitation after a full request. And I was lucky enough to be, like just the day before that call, I happened to be in a call with Mary Robinette Kowal through her Patreon – just like anybody who's a Patreon supporter of hers can go to these monthly calls.

And it's just like a Q&A whatever you want to ask Mary Robinette, you can ask. And so, I asked her like, "I have my first ever call with an agent tomorrow, what do I do?"

You know? I remember so clearly, she said, "Trust your gut, ask the questions; you're interviewing them just as much as they're interviewing you. You are looking at potentially tying yourselves together professionally for the lifetime of this book; and maybe, possibly, your whole career."

And so, I remember the thing that she said that I say over and over to myself and to other writers is like, "A bad agent for you is worse than no agent at all".

GP: Yes.



MP: I think this is true across the board; not just about agents, but it's about editors, it's about publishers, it's about maybe your co-author. It's about like any part of the process; like, a bad fit for you is worse than not having it at all – like not taking that opportunity, for sure.

GP: Yes. Jessi, do you want to chime in at all?

JH: I remember shortly after that conversation that Marie was talking about with the agent, that the two of us sat down to really decide what we wanted for Unrelenting and, potentially, for our entire careers, which feels like a really big conversation to have.

And we, at that point, we had two, kind of, leading options. Option number #1 was this R&R with an agent at a pretty well-known agency. And option #2 was a small, independent, traditional publisher that didn't have like a huge fan base or a huge amount of clout, but we'd sat down and had a conversation with them and we clicked, and there was so much about what they were doing that we believed in.

But at the same time, we had spent our entire lives having these dreams of traditional publishing through the Big-Four, and what that would look like and whatnot. And so, we had to decide which path we wanted to pursue. Did we want to get agented and then see if we could get with Big-Four, or did we want to go with this smaller house that was really aligned with our values?

And it was a really hard conversation. There were a lot of Pro-Con lists, and just like days of back-and-forth conversation between the two of us. And ultimately, we went with the smaller publisher because we felt that it was a better fit for us for the vision we had for Unrelenting, and that those publishers would really do everything that they could to make sure that our stories and ourselves were represented authentically.

GP: Yes. I want to highlight a couple of things that both of you mentioned. You know, one of the things that I think Marie said, "It felt like a big conversation to having", or "Deciding your whole career", as it were. I think for a lot of writers, especially when you're in that lead-up to your first book deal, you're sort of in this weird limbo where it feels like every single decision is life or death.

And some of them, not to be melodramatic, but some of them are and some of them are not; or maybe not life or death, like literally, but career life or death, as it were.

And I find that a lot of writers focus on the 'not important' things, but one of the things that is incredibly important is that fit between the author and the agent – & the author and the publisher because I think, I can't remember which one of you said it, but like, you're making a decision that will impact the lifespan of your book; that is a big deal.

I have had writer friends who have signed with an agent who was not the right agent from them – and they did it out of that, you know, scarcity, fear, emotion – and then one or two books later, they get a two or three book deal; so, now they're stuck with that agent for three books.

And if they walk away, the agent is still the one managing the books that they're contracted to write; and it creates all manner of headaches. And the thing that's really complicated is that the agent is still the one on record with the book contract for as long as that book is in print; so, that can be a really long time.

So, there's some decisions that you can walk away from pretty easily after making an oops; but then there's some where you really need to think it through and you need to have that vision of what it is that you want for your career beyond just the single book because you're going to have to think about that sooner rather than later – and probably, better to do it sooner.



So, I wanted to highlight that for our listeners, that like, not every decision is life or death – but the ones that are, take the time.

MP: Yeah, I totally agree with you. I think it's really important, and it was important for us to interrogate the Why behind the vision we had. Like I remember as a child – being like a nerd who loved Fantasy and Science Fiction books – I would literally doodle like the tour logo on of my notebooks at school, and like, all these big Fantasy Sci-Fi presses that have largely been consolidated at this point, but the imprints are still around a lot of the time.

That's what I was like always shooting for. And it took me actually having a manuscript and thank goodness, I had the manuscript with Jessi, with someone that I trusted and we could talk through this together, to actually ask myself like, but why do I want that?

And also, considering how much the industry has changed since I was like, you know, 12, are those reasons still reflective of the way the industry's working now? Or what I understand more about, like I didn't understand what an agent was, I didn't understand the role of an editor, I didn't understand all that stuff until I started going to conferences for writers or listening to resources like this podcast, right?

Like, I did not really understand what it took to publish a book. And so, once I had more information like; what part of that journey feels good to me; and why? And like, there's no wrong answer in all of this, but interrogating the Why behind your own vision can help you land a place for your book that is more aligned with the heart of your vision rather than sort of the superficial part of it.

GP: Ooh, I like that. So, as you were interrogating the Why – both individually and also as a co-author duo – what were some of the things that came up for both of you as the motivating factors behind that Why?

JH: I think, personally, a lot of it comes back to some of what you read in our bio. So, my stories – whether they're co-authored or my solo projects – tend to explore certain challenges that people come across in their lives.

And I really want my stories to reflect those in a way that feels true and honest to my own lived experience – and how I can pass that along to other people in a very fictional way and very supernatural Fantasy Sci-Fi way but still speaks to those truths.

And when I'm looking for in a relationship with other people in the industry, I'm looking for people who want to help me and my work be the best that it can be without sacrificing the fundamental foundational pieces that make it what it is.

So, as an example, we had a conversation with another publisher – around the same time we were having this R&R with the agent and the publishing house we ended up going with – and they were interested in representing us, so long as, we changed *Unrelenting* so that it had a romance subplot. And spoiler alert, there's no romance subplot in *Unrelenting*; that was very intentional on our part.

In fact, early on, when we were talking to early Alpha Readers, a lot of times they would come back and say, "Oh, are so-and-so and so-and-so an item?" And we'd be like, "No they're not." And we would actively work on revising it so that it was clear that they were not an item; we did not want a romance subplot, that was a very intentional decision on our part.

And so, you know, all other things about this house might have worked for us, but the fact that they wanted us to fundamentally change something of the story that was very intentional and purposeful



was one of those things that we looked at, and we were like, ‘Actually, this is not aligned with our values because this is not the type of story we’re trying to tell.’

And in order for us to work with someone for a very long time, we need them to understand us. We need them to understand the Why behind the decisions we make, and not view us and our stories just as a commodity.

GP: Yes, I love that. You know, it reminds me of something that my husband, lawyer-hubby, who is often the first person I turn to for advice with writing and business-related stuff. And one of his catch phrases is, “Gabriela, is this the hill you want to die on?”

And it always like puts me in perspective with whatever the issue might be because sometimes it is the hill that I want to die on; and dagnabbit, I am going to fight that battle to the death and make it go my way.

But a lot of the times, I realize like, ‘No, actually I’m going to pick a different battle, this is not the place where I need to really focus all of my energy – it’s not the thing I need to hold onto. And so, I think two things from what you said, Jessi; one, knowing what your values are.

So, like understanding why this was such an important component of your story; and then knowing that it is like a fundamental piece of the story that’s tied to your values as writers, and then making the decision that, ‘Yes, in fact, this is the hill I want to die on, and we’re just not going to work with someone who doesn’t see that.’

So, I think having that presence of mind and walking away from opportunities is really hard but so important. So, kudos for doing that and holding fast.

MP: [laughs] Thanks. I love the wisdom of your husband in that. And yeah, I think that’s probably even a better way to freeze what I was talking about before about like interrogating the Why. I want to make clear like, we have no issue with romance plots and subplots; it’s not like we think that those are evil, at all. It didn’t fit this story.

GP: Of course.

MP: And so, the thing about that was like, chances are, in the sequels that follow *Unrelenting*, there will be exploration of romance but through maybe a bit of a non-traditional lens. And so, when we were talking with that particular house that was very interested in that, like, did our perspective of what romance looks like or can or “should” be match, with theirs?

And there’s nothing wrong with either perspective, but once we realized that that probably wasn’t going to be a fit even for future books, that just helped us know like, ‘Hey, this isn’t a great fit.’

And ultimately, it’s like a relationship, right? Like if you have two people in a partnership but only one of them is really engaged with it or feels like it’s right for them, then it’s not right for either of them because the other person isn’t feeling that; and it’s totally the same professionally within writing.

GP: Right. And the idea that it’s okay for people or, you know, entities to not be coming from the same place, like it is totally okay for that publisher to want a speculative fiction story to have romance thread. And there are many fine books that have the romance thread and are speculative fiction.

It’s also totally okay for you and Jessi to say, “Yeah, you know, that’s not the vision we have for this book.” And so, both things can be 100% true, but if they don’t align, then, like you said, it makes no sense to try to force the two things to coexist.



JH: Absolutely. I think a lot of this comes down to that idea that you were talking about, about, 'What hill do you want to die on?' And then, I think like industry-specific kind of extrapolation of that is, you know, how much control do you want to have over those decisions, and how much are you willing to bend?

Because going with the path that we went with, we knew in doing so we would have a lot more control over those decisions. We knew that we could push back a little bit more than we potentially could if we were in a situation where we were agented and then our book was subbed out to an editor and then, you know, going up to a Big-Four--

Like you sacrifice a lot of control in those situations; and for some people, that may work. For us – with this book and at this point in our careers – we wanted to maintain enough control to sit down with the people who were in charge and have really open vulnerable, honest conversations about those hills, and whether they were hills to die on, and what the Whys behind them were, and why we were telling the story that we were telling.

GP: Yes. So, before we wrap things up, I wanted to just get a little bit of a sense from you about, you know, you've been working together writing fiction for a long time, also with the copywriting agency. I'm curious how the copywriting--

And like, you mentioned already how your process with the copywriting has sort of translated over to your process for writing this book. Did you notice anything else where the copywriting component or like the way you think about business has impacted the way you think about your authorship?

MP: Yeah, you know, it's funny, I just sent Jessi, it was like a writing Subreddit thread the other day and somebody was asking like, "How do I build an audience before my book comes out?"

And everybody was just like, "Don't, just write the book." And I'm like, "Yeah and also like, you can, you totally can." [laughs] And it was actually really nice to be able to go onto preorder status or preorder period with an established email list of people who knew who we were and were excited about the book.

And you know, I think having that platform was actually super helpful for us because we've been able to hit and already exceed some of the goals that we had, the sales goals for this book. So, I think yeah, like being able to look at it as a business was super helpful in terms of marketing.

I think the other thing that was really helpful is as business owners you just get really used to rejection a lot.

GP: Yeah.

MP: You know, like you're always being turned down by prospective clients or opportunities for podcast interviews or whatever it is you're looking for at that moment. And you very much learn to just not take it personally and just to acknowledge that like, hey, you made an offer, somebody else said, "That's not a good fit for me," and you just move on, and you just take them at their word.

And so, we were very unflinching in our process of asking for help after we had done a lot to support others; and also, just engage human-to-human with people. Like there's not a lot about this that's felt transactional to us because it's all been very much based in relationships, and I think a lot of that really comes from the mindset that we've adopted as business owners.



GP: Yeah, 100%. And you know, I think for a lot of writers, the dreaded P-word, Platform, is often like this sort of Damocles like hanging over our heads, but like you, as someone who runs their own business, you kind of get used to this idea that marketing is part of the process; and it's also a creative process.

And so, embracing it rather than running scared from it and building that audience and doing it in a way that feels authentic, and like you said, person-to-person, human-to-human, it doesn't feel transactional; it doesn't feel icky or whatever, salesy, smarmy, but feels like just making friends and geeking out about interesting ideas like books. That's actually kind of fun.

MP: Yeah.

GP: Yeah. I don't think writers realize what they're missing, when they run away from platform.

MP: And like, it's about quality; I'd say much more over quantity. Like I don't feel we have a huge platform; and yet, we've still been able to hit our goals -and I think that's just, yeah, because of those relationships. I think you probably wanted to add something to that, Jessi.

JH: Yeah, I wanted to pull it away from the marketing, for just a second, and geek out about the process a little more. Although before I do, I just want to echo that there's nothing quite as rewarding as having just like a bunch of people that you can just nerd out with.

Like that's just one of the best feelings to know that people are also out there geeking out over the fact that like, I don't know, you created a magic system that feels really cool and is really fun to read on the page and whatnot.

And like, having people who can share in those experiences and you can geek out about those things, it's really cool. But what I was going to say is, as far as running our business and how it's helped us, I think, with the writing process, one thing that we touched on briefly that I do not think we would be nearly as good at, if we did not have our copywriting business, is the idea of voice.

Within our business, one of the things that we do with our clients is we try to capture their voice so that they can outsource their content without losing authenticity.

We've developed a whole process for this, for; what words do they use, what tone do they have, what phrases do they use, how does the content that we create sound like them? That works really well on the copywriting side, but it's also completely transferable to fiction.

We have a brand voice for Unrelenting in the subsequent books in the series, and that brand voice is very different from the voice of my solo project right now, for example. And it's all based in like; how the characters talk, and how the narration sets the tone of the setting and things like that.

And we just sort of have been doing it for so long that it's almost, we don't even think about the fact that we're doing it, but we do, we end up with this sort of understanding of the voice of the piece as we're writing it. I think that's what allows us to create such a cohesive piece, even though there are two writers.

GP: Oh my gosh, we need to unpack that a little bit. When you're assessing the voice, and I love this idea of translating brand voice to the voice of the story, and vice versa, right?

Like for authors who are listening to this, if you are trying to figure out what your voice as an author is – like speaking to your audience, your platform's voice, as it were – you can do the reverse and unpack how you figure out your own voice in your fiction and go in the opposite direction.



So, what is it that you look for when you're unpacking the voice? Like, is it just word choice, is it cadence? Like, how do you break it down?

MP: Yeah, I think this goes, ultimately, to the Why behind either the story or the character, because you can do a voice for the story as a whole or you could do voices for different characters in terms of anybody who's a narrative POV, whether like a third-person close, limited, or first-person or whatever.

Because maybe somebody has a really bubbly voice and maybe they love humor that's a little self-deprecating and maybe they use words like 'Awesome' or whatever; there's like certain words or phrases or tone that come in through their voice.

But like, what's going on behind the scenes? Is this part of their character arc? Are they using that bubblyness as a shield for actually feeling something that they're avoiding, that they actually need to be able to confront through the story?

And so, not that they necessarily lose the bubblyness after they confront that thing and have that character growth, but it actually can become deeper and richer. And so, we don't necessarily psychoanalyze our clients when we do this with them.

You know, for them we're more looking at cadence and tone and all of that. But I think when we translate it to fiction, because we have to look at those things like character arc or the entire thematic elements for the story or the plot – that allows us to go into the Why, and that allows us to develop a voice that really makes sense with the character and that is a nice compliment to the growth that happens to the story.

GP: I love how you unpacked that, and how voice is so deeply intertwined between who the character is and like the character's arc versus what's appearing on the page in that very moment.

As you were describing the bubbly character, it made me think immediately of the movie *Clueless* and that scene at the end, right, like toward the end where like the fountains and she has that realization like, 'I love Josh,' and she has this moment.

And up until then, she had been very kind of almost superficially bubbly, but then she actually starts to really try harder to be a better person. And so, you still see that bubblyness and she's still, you know, the girl with like the fashion and the phone and all of that, but it feels like there's a little bit more to her after that moment.

And so, I think that's a great example of like, you could have a character who the voice still continues but now there's like a new wrinkle to it, a new layer to it.

JH: Absolutely. There are so many different layers to unpack with voice; voice can show how a character is changing, voice can show what a character is hiding, voice can also help you with understanding the setting and the genre and the tone of the story itself – if you pull back from the characters.

Unrelenting takes place in Cleveland, Ohio, which is where I grew up, personally, or I grew up outside of it. It's a Rust Belt City; and it's a Rust Belt City that is in flux from these, a lot of old abandoned factories into-- Okay, there are some areas where you have these playhouses that are older but very refined, and you have areas where they're revitalizing and turning abandoned buildings into lofts.



And there's this push-and-pull between the old and the new; and since *Unrelenting* as a supernatural thriller, and since it has this mystery element and this sort of gritty element, all of that comes across in the voice too when we're describing the city, when we're describing the alleyways, when we're describing how Bridget moves through this place that is kind of well-known as being damp and wet--

And like just from my perspective, great place for a lot of really mysterious magic to happen, and that comes through in the voice as well. So, it's partially the voice of the characters, but it's also the voice of the setting and the story as a whole that all gets wrapped up together.

GP: 100%. You know, as you were describing the setting, the word that pops into my head to describe sort of the mood, at least, at the start of the book is, it's noir. Like it's very noir. And so, there is that grittiness and that-- I mean, you could almost like move it back in time by like 80 years and, you know, have like Humphrey Bogart with the fedora, but, not really.

[laughter]

MP: 100%. Yeah. Just like, you know, give her the cell phone and yeah, this could be anytime.

GP: Yeah. I feel like we could keep geeking out about this book and about writing and the process and all these good things, but you ladies have a business to run. So, in the interest of time, what's next for you?

MP: Yeah, so for both of us together, we are working on a sequel to *Unrelenting* which is being a lot of fun and also uniquely challenging. And also, we have solo projects. So, the main one that I'm working on right now is a fantasy heist.

GP: That's awesome. When you say, both of you have now set solo projects, I keep thinking like, solo album and like, you know, your fans like, screaming.

[laughter]

GP: It will happen.

JH: It's a lot of projects at once. We tend to juggle quite a few, but on my end, I'm working on the sequel with Marie and then I'm also working on a Sci-Fi story that is exploring how life might look if the division of classes continues once we leave earth and start living on stations above our very sad home that is starting to see the effects of climate change.

GP: Interesting. Well, I kind of need to read both of them so I can't wait for more news from both of you. I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

MP: Okay, I'll take it first. For me, 100% it's been, find yourself a trusted community of other writers. And I don't mean, let me just surround myself with like all The New York Times Best Sellers.

Like, I mean, people who are at your stage in their career who share interest with you in terms of maybe genre or what really like makes them tick about stories in writing because you will all rise together and support one another. And honestly, those have been some of the deepest friendships that we have at this point, are fellow writers that we've befriended and gotten to know along this journey.



GP: What about you Jessi?

JH: Well, Marie 100% stole mine. [laughs] I'm actually going to elaborate on that a little more because community really has been so important in our careers.

For a long time, it was just like The Marie and Jessi Show, which is great to an extent, but at some point, you do kind of need to go out of that bubble and find other people who like, Marie said, are at the same phase in your career – and that whole rising tide lifts all boats thing.

I think it's so important once you find your community to figure out how you can best actively contribute to that community so that it doesn't feel like you are just there to promote what you're working on, and that's it. I see this a lot in communities where people will jump in and be like, 'Hey, here's my stuff,' and then run away and like never fully engage.

And it's so important to actually look at the genuine relationships that you can build with people, once you find that community that works for you; and to invest that time, invest that energy and just do it for its own sake – not necessarily because you're going to get anything out of it other than the pleasure of knowing other people who can nerd out with you.

GP: Such great advice. I love how you both have like a similar core thread, but each have your own, sort of, take on it. So, it's kind of a microcosm of your working relationship, which I think is kind of cool.

[laughter]

GP: Thank you so much Jessi and Marie. It has been an absolute blast speaking with you today.

MP: Thank you so much. I've had a great time.

JH: Thank you, too.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

