

Sabrina: Hi everyone! Welcome back to LitTea! I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and my special guest today is Erica Waters, the author of *Ghost Wood Song* and *The River Has Teeth*. Her short story "Stay" is featured in *The Gathering Dark* anthology. Her next novel, *The Restless Dark*, comes out tomorrow, October 4<sup>th</sup>. So, let's do this thing!

Erica: Hi!

Sabrina: Hello.

Sabrina: So, you ready?

Erica: I'm ready.

Sabrina: All right. What book made you a reader?

Erica: Okay, So, I was thinking about this - like trying to, like remember the very first book, you know, that I really felt passionate about, and I can't remember. Like, I remember - like I have a memory of the first book I ever read, which I'm pretty sure it was one of those like old vintage primers, like *See Spot Run*. You know, "This is Jack. This is Jane." But, the first books I remember getting really into as a reader, to the point that I just gobbled them up were *Goosebumps* by R. L. Stine. Which I think most people my age would probably - a lot of people my age - would say that those were, you know, their initial books that they got really excited about. What I did is I went from *Goosebumps*, which are appropriate for children and I went straight to John Saul, like an adult, you know, horror thriller writer who is not appropriate for children. But, like my next book I got really obsessed with was this book of his called *Shadows* which was like, about these genius kids who like, are at this like, mansion boarding school by the sea, and like their brains get used for like artificial intelligence.

Sabrina: This sounds amazing. What's it called? *Shadows*?

Erica: It's called *Shadows*. I haven't read it since I was like you know, 10 or 11. So, I have no idea how it holds up, but I was obsessed with that book at that age, like really obsessed.

Sabrina: I need to check that out, too, cause that sounds really fun.

Erica: Yeah, I kind of want to reread it and just see if it's what I remember.

Sabrina: It is interesting reading things again and seeing if they like, hold up. And, it's also interesting seeing things, like, I don't know, some of them like, hmm... [Laughter.] So, what book made you a writer?

Erica: So, I will say, like, I mean, I've written since I was a kid. Like, I've always loved writing. I think the book that made me go like, 'Oh! I would really like to do this professionally' would be the *Shadow and Bone*, Laini Taylor. Is that it? Yeah, you know, the Laini Taylor series, or is it *Daughter of Smoke and Bone*? Wait, I'm mixing up all my - there's too many fantasies.

Sabrina: We are, we are! It's not your fault. They're all the same name.

Erica: They are. [Both laugh.] But anyway, like I read that and that was the first time that I went like, 'Oh, like, I can kind of see what I might like to write.' And then I read *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner, and that was when I went like, 'Oh, I can write fantasy, but I can write it my way.' Like I can write it from like a really southern perspective, you know, which wasn't something I'd really read a lot of - kind of southern gothic, you know, infused fantasy. And so, I think that was kind of where I found, like, my voice as a writer. What I really wanted to do was kind of merging, you know, those two ideas together.

Sabrina: That's awesome. I love that! I read on your blog you started writing really early, and that you got into poetry. Who are some of your favorite poets?

Erica: So, at that age I really loved Emily Dickinson. Like I don't know. I mean like Emily Dickinson is like goth, you know she's super goth.

Sabrina: She is. This is great. I'm like really seeing your life, the steps that got you to the books that are out on shelves now.

Erica: Yeah. Yeah, I think you can kind of track it. But, like I loved her and because she was - she was goth, and like just the way she wrote language was so intriguing to me. And like, I loved that she was kind of a hermit, you know, and kind of a recluse. You know, on the extrovert-introvert scale, I'm like all the way on the introvert scale. Like, I can put on the like, you know, friendly extrovert thing when

Erica: I need to - like do events, or whatever. But, like most of the time it's like, me and my house, like, with my dogs, like –

Sabrina: With you.

Erica: Yeah. Like, I guess I just like really like, under, like, related to her as a, you know, angsty middle schooler who - and I started writing, you know, poetry about time and death. And, you know...

Sabrina: Oh my gosh, I love this so much! And then you also wrote short stories at that time as well, right?

Erica: So, I really like, I really started writing short stories. But like, outside of what I did for school, I guess. I really started writing more short stories in college.

Sabrina: Oh, okay.

Erica: Yeah. So, I and those were really like lit fic, you know? They were like - they were like the reading in my English classes - like Raymond Carver - and you know, more like the kind of emphasis on like atmosphere, character, kind of with that epiphany at the end of it. You know that like sort of what you think of when you think of like a literary short story. So, I really was writing those as an undergraduate.

Sabrina: You know – again - I still, I see all these little layers going into the books that I see on shelves. That's amazing. Okay. Do you want to share some hobbies or interests that you have?

Erica: Yeah, so, if you read my Bios on any of my books, they all say that I play the banjo, which I'm getting increasingly embarrassed about. Because I was trying really hard to learn the banjo when I was writing *Ghost Wood Song*, because that book involves bluegrass so, heavily, you know. And, I have a banjo and I have a deep and, you know, I really want to learn how to play it. But, you know, I kept like, starting learning it, putting it back down, starting learning it, putting it back down. And the truth is that I just have no musical talent.

Sabrina: Instruments are so hard! They're so hard.

Erica: I know! And like, the banjo is an incredibly difficult instrument! Like, all bluegrass music, like it's really hard to play. And like, the people who are good at it usually start playing when they're like small children, you know. So, if you get someone, who's an adult - not particularly musically gifted and, you know, not particularly dedicated to practicing, you're never gonna get anywhere. So, I really need to get my publisher to take that out of my Bio.

Sabrina: Oh my gosh. No, that's okay. It's a cool- I mean, hey - you're trying, you're trying,

Erica: I'm trying, I'm doing my best. The hobbies that I actually engage in more frequently are, like, I really like gardening. And I like building terrariums.

Sabrina: Oh, cool.

Erica: Yeah, I love being out in nature. So, I actually took a nat - like, when I was writing my second book, *The River Has Teeth* - I took a naturalist class And, so, got to be out learning, you know about, like Tennessee ecosystems and natural history. And, I got really familiar with a lot of the, like, local flora and fauna. So, that's the kind of stuff I get really excited about, which I think you can probably see in my books a little bit.

Sabrina: Yeah. The nature was so well written. Would you like to tell us about your pets?

Erica: Yes. So, Nutmeg is my beagle. So, she's actually getting up there in age, like, she's like, 12 years old, but she is so incredibly spunky and like, every morning and every night when you feed her, she jumps straight up in the air. Like, she just springs straight up and down, and I don't understand how she's 12 years old. And then I also have a Chihuahua who's like, the polar opposite of Nutmeg. Like she's a little goth queen, and yeah, her name is Luna. She's the best. She's like my little familiar.

Sabrina: Nice! That's so, cute. Oh my gosh. Okay. Do you want to get into some querying and publishing questions?

Erica: Yes, I do.

Sabrina: Okay, so, you did Pitch Wars in 2017 with *Ghost Wood Song*. Do you want to tell us about some of the revisions that you undertook, and some of the tips and like, writing tips and tricks you learned?

Erica: Yeah, sure. Yeah. So, yeah. I already queried two books at this point And so, then I got into Pitch Wars with this book, *Ghost Wood Song*. And, this was my first time, I think, truly learning what it meant to revise.

Sabrina: It's different.

Erica: It's yeah, like I'd fiddled with you know, language and you know, maybe deleted a scene here, moved a scene there. But, I had no idea that revision could mean stripping a book down to, you know, the foundations and rebuilding it, which is really what I did with *Ghost Wood Song*. So, it was a massive amount of revision, of working on things like character motivations, stakes, pacing. You know, really making big changes to characters, making huge changes to plot lines. So, that was the first time I really learned that, you know, a book can be good and you still have to kind of break it down and rebuild it to make it into something really great. And so, that's, I think - I think working in Pitch Wars is where I learned not to be precious about my writing, you know, to be willing to make changes while also sticking to my vision for what I wanted the book to be. So, yeah, that was a really cool, really challenging experience. And at the end of it, I think I ended up with a really good book. So, I'm really glad I got to have that experience.

Sabrina: I think you did end up with a really good book, yeah!

Erica: Thank you. [Both laugh.]

Sabrina: I mean, I didn't read that version, but I probably read close to that version. I don't think they change too too too terribly much past... usually, do they, do they? Let's talk about this. How much do they change past querying?

Erica: What like, at what - at what point do you mean?

Sabrina: Between getting your agent and going on sub. Let's start there.

Erica: Okay, I mean I would say the vast majority of the book changed during Pitch Wars so, that was done on the front end. And then with

Erica: my agent, it was more about kind of building up and refining what was already there, you know? So, I think I worked on revisions with her for, maybe two or three months. And, that was - and that like I said - it was just like it wasn't a big rebuilding thing. It was just making it stronger, making it smoother, you know. So, I mean like sometimes, you know, people will have to do that big kind of breaking down work with an agent, or an editor. But, because I'd already gone through that mentorship process that was already kind of done for that book. But yeah, I mean like the first draft of *Ghost Wood Song* is incredibly different from what you see on the shelf. They're really different.

Sabrina: I'm so, I'm like 'Well, you said that to me, you don't have to do that.'

Erica: Like, I'll tell you a couple things that are different, okay?

Sabrina: Okay. Yeah, yeah.

Erica: So, like, one thing is like, Shady's mom was a psychic in the first draft. She's not, now.

Sabrina: Oh, interesting.

Erica: There was a beagle named Chipmunk in the first draft, and I ended up having to cut. And I think it was a lot of like, you know, I was - I was a new writer and I had a lot of these like, little scenes that I liked, but they weren't accomplishing enough in the narrative, you know? So, like - like in the book when Shady meets Cedar - one of her love interests - for the first time, it's at a talent competition, you know, and he's playing Shady Grove. And so, I made that, you know, introduction serve a lot of purposes eventually. But the first time she met him in my first draft, it was just like in a coffee shop, which.

Sabrina: Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Erica: Yeah, it didn't have the same oomph to it. And so, a lot of what Pitch Wars for me was, was learning how to take a scene and rework it, so that it accomplished more than just one thing. Like, it's not just, 'Oh, we need to meet this character.' It's like, 'We need to meet this character. We need to drive the plot forward. We need to drive the theme forward. We need to work on character, you know, arcs.'

Erica: So, it was kind of learning to make every scene really meaningful and impactful, which is not something, you know, I don't think it's that's something I necessarily realized I needed to do, as a beginning writer.

Sabrina: It's also really hard to do like, in those earlier drafts, until you like see the whole story and everything too, when you're still... It's a lot easier to like split stuff up, I think, in those earlier drafts. So, your query is amazing. I read it. It's on your website. Did you want to share it on the podcast, or it's totally up to you?

Erica: Yeah, sure, I'm happy to do that. Let me just pull it up really quick. Okay, I will. Yeah, this is the one I used. So, after Pitch Wars, I didn't get an agent directly through Pitch Wars, I started querying afterwards. So, this is the query letter that I used: "When her daddy died in a car crash, 16-year-old Shady Grove Crawford thought he took his ghost raising fiddle with him. Now, the Pine Woods outside her trailer are filling with eerie bluegrass music and restless spirits. And Shady is certain daddy's fiddle is calling to her from beyond the grave. Then her brother is arrested for murder, and Shady knows she must find the fiddle to prove his innocence, and discover the real killer. She forms a bluegrass band with her secret crush, Sarah, and a rodeo boy who's trying to swagger his way into her heart. Together, they set out to raise the dead. But instead of finding the truth, Shady conjures up the Shadow Man, the vengeful spirit that destroyed daddy's life, and now has laid claim to hers. To free herself from its deadly grip, Shady must unearth the fiddle stock's dark origins and uproot the shameful past daddy tried so hard to hide. If she doesn't, her brother will go to prison, and Shady will follow her Daddy to an early grave. *Ghost Wood Song* is a YA contemporary fantasy, complete at 71,000 words. (I think it ended up being with 95,000 words by the end.) Jeff Zentner's *The Serpent King* meets Maggie Stiefvater's *The Raven Boys*. The novel was showcased in the 2017 Pitch Wars contest." And then I just include my bio and just letting the agent know what I was including in the query,

Sabrina: It's so, good. Okay. So, and yeah, that's why I said earlier, that it didn't change too terribly much. I mean there's obviously nuances within that, and twists and surprises that aren't in the query. But, that is definitely the query that's on the shelf.

Erica: Definitely.

Sabrina: It really is. That's amazing.

Erica: Yeah. That's really representative of the book that you get.

Sabrina: Since you just shared your amazing query, do you want to share some tips? How to create such an amazing query, and how to showcase, so much of your book in such a short amount of time, and like, what's needed.

Erica: Yeah. So, one formula that I've heard a lot of times is you need to have the hook, the book, and the cook. So, hook, meaning, you need something, right off the bat, that gets the attention of your reader. And so, you know, you don't want to include just like random biographical details, you know, you want to have something right from the beginning. So, like I start off with, you know, this idea of the ghost raising fiddle which is a fairly high concept idea, right?

Sabrina: It's super cool!

Erica: Yeah. So, it's like something you can communicate easily, and then I share, you know, the book. So, there's a character, there's something that she wants to do. She wants to find the fiddle and prove her brother's innocence. You know, there's a little bit about how she goes out to do that, and then, of course, you have to have stakes. So, in this sense, it's, you know, if she doesn't, if she's not able to do the things she setting out to do, her brother's gonna be in prison and then also you know, she's at risk of falling prey to the same, you know, the Shadow Man, which had laid claim to her dad's life. So, you know, you have a character, you have something that they want to do. You have the obstacles against them. You have the stakes, if they fail. So, you need to kind of, you know, get as much of all the kind of meat of your story in there. You don't need all the like, little details. Like, I don't talk about every character who's in the book or, you know, I very briefly mention that, you know, you can tell there's gonna be a little love triangle, but I did that in one sentence. So, it's kind of trying to get everything in there as concisely as as you can, and then I think you don't necessarily have to have comp titles, but I think they can be helpful, if they're effective. And so, in this instance, I used uh Jeff Zentner's *The Serpent King* meets Maggie Stiefvater's *The Raven Boys*, which I think was a pretty fair description of what readers could expect from the novel. And, those were both - at the time - really popular titles



Erica: that weren't – well, they were popular, but they weren't, you know, like, *Twilight* or, you know, *Harry Potter*, or anything that was...

Sabrina: They were popular enough to be recognized, easily. Where an agent could say, 'Oh, I know where this is going,' or what vein we're in, without having to go 'What is that?' and then, but not so, popular as like, *Twilight*.

Erica: Exactly. Yeah. It's like they - that you could tell, you know, where might this sit on the shelf and like, what can I expect from like, the voice and overall kind of tone of the book, I think. And so, like, you know, that wasn't like a perfect comp title because obviously like *The Serpent King* is a contemporary novel. It doesn't have any paranormal elements, but I think it helped convey sort of the voice and character elements of the book.

Sabrina: I mean, it clearly worked.

Erica: It worked.

Sabrina: It worked really well! You got five offers, yes?

Erica: I did. Yeah.

Sabrina: So, what kinds of questions did you ask agents, and their clients, to help you decide?

Erica: So, I asked a lot of questions like about their editorial style. You know, did they like to do a lot of editing with their client, or were they more just interested in sales? I personally wanted an agent who was really editorial since I was a new writer and I felt like I would need the help. I asked about like communication, you know. So, like I'd ask clients, like you know, if you send your agent an email, how long does it take for them to respond? You know, do you feel like they really value you, and are you a priority for them? I asked questions about the literary agency as a whole, you know, like did you feel supported by the agency? Like in Lauren's case, she actually had some clients at different stages of their career reach out to me, which I thought was a really cool thing for her to do. So, she had, you know she had clients who had already sold a few books and were fairly successful, and she had clients who, like, had gone on sub and not sold a book, so that I could know, like, how does she treat clients when, you know, their first book doesn't sell. And then

Erica: she had some newer clients that she was still working with, you know, developmentally. And so, some agents provided those contacts for me, some didn't, and I just reached out to the writers. And, you know, just asked honest questions. You know, what are they like to work with? Do you - do you like working with them? Do you feel supported? And like, directly to the agents I would ask about, kind of obviously, like what was their vision for my book? Like, what changes would they like to see? I would ask, you know, about their other sales, you know, like, you know, where would they, where would they submit my book? You know, where could they see my book being placed? Just to get a sense of what did - what kind of future would they be able to envision for my book. And that was pretty illuminating.

Sabrina: Yeah, those are great questions to ask. Do you have any advice to guide other writers who have multiple offers?

Erica: Um, so, I mean it can be a really challenging choice, you know? Like with my five, like you know, they were all good reputable agents, from good agencies. And you know, I think, you know any of them could have made a good agent for me. And so, I looked at their sales, I looked at their client testimonials. And, of course, I had to take into consideration what my phone call with each of them was like. Did we connect, were they easy to talk to and - but in the end you know, it came down for me to like there were two agents that I felt really strongly about, and it was - actually - ended up being a really difficult decision. In the end I went with Lauren, just because I felt like she best understood what I was trying to accomplish. You know, I felt like she really understood the heart of my book, and that she especially understood like the socio-economic kind of context I was writing in. I just felt that she really grasped that, and that's something that's usually important to my books, as a writer, from a low-income background. And so, I just felt like she was really gonna get what I was trying to do and help me do my - do it the best that I could. So, yeah, so, I think just, you know, sometimes it's, you have to go with your gut, you know. Like, I had offers from agents who were from more prestigious agencies, who were much farther along in their careers, had a lot more sales. Like, Lauren was still a fairly new agent, but my gut told me that she was the person that I would have the best experience with. And, like I said, like, you know, a lot of the other agents would have been great, too. And I don't think it was like - I don't think there was necessarily a wrong decision, which is kind of, you know, made it an even harder

Erica: decision, you know. But I think sometimes you just, you know, I actually made a spreadsheet where I like laid out, like, all of the pros and cons of all of them and everything. But, in the end, it was really it came down to your gut. And, you know what, feels right to you. And, and Lauren felt just right to me.

Sabrina: I mean, y'all seem to be doing really well together, so-

Erica: Yeah, we've been together for almost five years and we've sold - we've sold four books together so far. So, yeah, she's a she's a really excellent agent. I would recommend her, Lauren Spieller at Triada, to anybody who is looking for a good agent.

Sabrina: Yay. So, what do you think are some red flags with agents that authors can look for? And, that can be about the agents or even the agencies as a whole.

Erica: Yeah, I think - I think again gut check, you know. I think a lot of writers, especially when they've been querying for a while, they can get a little kind of, you know, you start feeling a little desperate. And so, if you get an offer, you're like, even if you have a gut feeling that something's not right, you might want to jump on that offer. But, I think going with your - with your gut is always smart. Like, you can usually tell when there's something fishy. Some things that I guess I would say is, like, I would be suspicious of - of an agent who made an offer on my book without reading the entire book, which has happened to friends of mine, and it hasn't ended up well. So, I would definitely not go with someone who didn't read your whole book. Someone who wasn't willing to give you two weeks to make a decision, which is standard. I would not go with that agent. I asked to see the contract. Like, you know, just a boilerplate contract from each agent who offered.

Sabrina: Oh, that's good.

Erica: And if someone won't show you that contract, I would probably be suspicious of that, because none of them said no. So, yeah, I think those are some things you could look out for. And make sure you read the contract, and do your best, you know, get help if you need help in understanding it. Yeah, I think I think those are the things that stick out to me.

Sabrina: So, you got to look at five different agency contracts. Were there any differences that you noticed?

Erica: They were very similar. I mean, again, it's been five years so, yeah, you know, it's a little - I'm a little rusty on some of this. I remember one agency, like, had something in there about charging authors for supplies or something, and that to me was a little bit of a red flag. I was like that doesn't seem quite right to me, you know. So, that was one person I, like, I knew just from the contract, I wouldn't be going with.

Sabrina: That's interesting, yeah.

Erica: But again, like I want to say I'm not an expert on any of this. Like, this is just kind of what I felt like as a writer trying to suss out, you know, what felt good to me. But yeah, those I think - I think I feel like, you know, agents are trying to sell themselves, of course, like they want to present the best possible version of themselves to you, but I think, are they being honest? Are they being - are they - are they answering your questions fully? Do you feel like they have a good understanding of your book and what you want to accomplish? Do they have a good understanding of the industry? And, you know, do they seem to have contacts? Do they seem to have the ability to make a sale, you can look at Publishers Marketplace to see what kind of sales they've made. You can, you know, talk to their clients, see what's going on. I think just gathering as much information about an agent as you can before signing with them. I think if you do that and then, you know, if you - if anything comes up and you don't feel comfortable, I think just being able to say no to that person, you know, which I know isn't always easy to do.

Sabrina: It's hard, but yeah.

Erica: But, in the end, you'll be glad you did it.

Sabrina: I mean, shelving a book at the agent stage is a lot different from shelving a book at the submission stage. If you shelve book at the agency, it hasn't gone anywhere. It's still there. It's still waiting for you. It's still nice and fresh and ready. If you haven't found the right agent yet. Like it's a little different once it's been on sub. So, yeah, so what do you think authors can expect from their agent?

Erica: So, just from my own experience, I think you can expect an agent who should be collaborative with you, right? Like, they recognize that your book is your book, and it's their job to help you make it as good as possible and to get it into the right hands. So, things I expect from my agent are, you know, if I email her that she responds within a within a reasonable amount of time, what she always does. You know, that she's respectful of me and my career. That she's doing her best, you know, to help me be successful. My agent is very editorial. So, you know, if I send her a project, I expect notes back. Which, you know, that can vary I know for agents. Not every agent is editorial to the same degree. Lauren and I decide on projects together.

Sabrina: Before you dive in?

Erica: Yeah, so, I might send her some - some queries basically - some query style pitches and say like 'What do you think about this?' You know, 'Do you think this will work?' I might send her some pages. You know, and she'll, she might come back and say like 'Oh I really love this. Let's go forward' or she might come back and say, 'I like this. But I'm concerned about this element, could we do something different here?' So, it's really collaborative and it's about like, you know, for me, like, I am making the majority of my income as a writer. And so, I don't want to waste time on projects that aren't gonna go anywhere. So, I like, you know, getting from the outset, you know, the sense that she knows the industry. She knows, you know - she knows the market better than I do, even though I read a lot. And so, I trust her judgment and anyway - she so - like if I send her a project, you know, she'll send me notes back. They're very thorough, whether I want them to be or not. So, I expect her to, you know, to basically just, you know, help me create the best work that I can, and find the best place to put that work. I mean do you have more specific questions about that relationship?

Sabrina: Well, for you specifically, like do you usually work with an edit letter, does she do like in depth comments, that kind of thing?

Erica: Yes. She'll usually do both. Um, so, I'll usually get an edit letter, you know, outlining things like, you know, character, pacing, themes, plot points. And then, she'll also often do kind of, you know, inline, you know, to help illuminate, which has been true for me for my editor as well. Like, I think that's pretty common that you get like a long edit letter, and then sometimes you'll get, you know,

Erica: the document back with inline and textual notes, which can be really helpful.

Sabrina: And then, how collaborative are you in terms of when you're on sub? Like are - you do you have access to like your sub list and everything? Do you talk about who you want to go with? It might be different now since you've got some books out there, you might either have a set deal, or options with the same.

Erica: So, yeah. But the first, I'll tell you what happened with *Ghost Wood Song*, which is that, you know - once the book was ready to submit - she said, you know, do you have anyone you know you would like to submit to? And, I was a newbie, I was like, 'Oh no, I don't know anything. No, I trust you.' or whatever, you know. So, she drew up the list of editors at which imprints she wanted to submit to, and you know, she let me know where she would be submitting, and the way she does it is different with every client. It just depends like how involved you want to be and how much you want to know. In my case I preferred not to know very much. Like, I didn't really want to be super involved in the submission process. So, she didn't send me the rejections, you know. She only let me know if there was actual interest. And, so, I stayed out of it as much as I could. Because for me, I'm like, this is why I have an agent. Like, you know, I don't really want to be involved in this. You know, I just want her to handle it. And, so, she did, and you know, she did a great job.

Sabrina: Nice. So, have you done anything on proposal since your first deal?

Erica: So, my first deal was a two-book deal. So, it was for *Ghost Wood Song* and whatever project I wrote, within specific parameters, next. You know, like my next YA paranormal. And so, after *Ghost Wood Song*, I basically like, I had another book I had already started working on that I knew I would like to be my second. And, so, I pretty much just submitted a proposal. Lauren and I submitted a proposal to my editor, like, you know, how do you feel about this being Erica's next book? And she really liked it and was on board. So, I think for that one like again, it's been a while. I think I initially submitted, like, 100 pages and a synopsis, just to get her totally on board with the project. And then, that book deal had an Option Clause, meaning that Harper Teen got to look at, got first dibs - kind of got first look - at my next YA paranormal. And so, yeah. And, so, when it came that time, what we did was we submitted, I think, three pitches to my editor and you know, just pitches, and said do you like

Erica: any of these? Or no, I think it was pitches and maybe, like, 5 or 10 pages for each project. And, she picked one she really liked. And, so, then I um, at that point submitted, I think, I think we kind of did something similar. I think I did about 100 pages and a synopsis again. And then, once she was on board, I wrote the rest. And so, that was – anyway - Oh, yeah. And so, Harper ended up buying that - that option from me, as well as my next one. So, I have 2 two-book deals with Harper Teen.

Sabrina: Okay. Then it's so confusing. It's so much math.

Erica: Yeah, so, *The Restless Dark* is, my was my option book, which became the first book in my second deal. And then there's another book, that I'm working on now, which will come out in 2023, which hasn't been announced yet. So, yeah, I've actually - I have been really lucky with going on sub. Like, it's not something, even though I'm like, you know, four books into my career, it's not something I've had a lot of experience with. So, my first book, my editor, Alice Jerman, at Harper. Like, I'm pretty sure, like, Lauren had already kind of talked the book up to her a little bit, like, in person because she represented another of Lauren's clients. Or, she was editor of another of Lauren's clients. And so, she kind of knew the book was coming and was about excited about it. And so, when the book went on sub, I think Alice responded within, like, three weeks, and wanted the book. So, I had a really short on sub time, and then I've never had to do it again.

Sabrina: Okay. That's awesome!

Erica: Yeah, it's just been kind of like, 'Will Harper Teen buy my next book?' That's been kind of my, you know, my experience so far, and I haven't gone out on submission with any other projects yet. Yeah, so, I will probably, you know, get to experience that, you know, in the not-too-distant future. Kind of experiencing what it's like to go on submission.

Sabrina: Is there another Option Clause? Is that how that works? I don't know.

Erica: Yes. Yeah, there is.

Sabrina: There is? Okay. So, we'll see, we'll see.

Erica: Yeah, so, it's kind of like 'We'll see what happens.'

Sabrina: Where are you in the writing process? Before we started recording, you actually said that you were on deadline. I'm assuming that's with book four?

Erica: Yeah, that's with book four, which is - I can't say very much about it yet, because we haven't announced it, but it's...

Sabrina: You don't have to say anything about it specifically. I was just curious about like timing and like where you are in the process as far as like first draft or like, that kind of thing.

Erica: Yeah, yeah, yes. So, I just finished my second round of developmental edits. Yeah. So, we're pretty far along so, my agent has read, let's see one, two, three versions of it at this point. So, or my editor, I always mix up agent and editor, like, when I'm talking. But yeah, so, Alice has read the book and has written me two edit letters. And, so, I've done two rounds of revision. I just, yeah, just finished the second one. And so, there'll just be line edits left before it goes to copy editing.

Sabrina: Okay, cool.

Erica: Getting close to the end for that one, yeah.

Sabrina: You're almost there. There's an end in sight. You're so close.

Erica: So close.

Sabrina: So, are those like, really big - the developmental?

Erica: They can be. So, I tend to, I guess you would say underwrite, you know. Like I write skeleton drafts. And, and, so, like my initial drafts are not - you know, they're - they're shorter, they're less developed. And so, for me, like, I know for some people, revision is a process of cutting away, right? To kind of cut away all the fluff, to reveal what's underneath. For me, it's more like the core is already there, and it's about building up. And, so, a lot of what I do with my editor is about, you know, working on characterization, you know, making my characters jump off the page more. Be more human, have deeper more complex relationships. And, you know, we'll work on things like pacing, trying to make the book feel more tense,



Erica: or the pace move along more evenly. So, I actually did a fair bit of rewriting on the second round. I had to rewrite the ending - again. I've had some trouble getting the last third of the book just right. It's been difficult. So, I had to write some new scenes. And cut some of the scenes out and kind of re figure - reconfigure things in this new draft. So, I've always done a lot of revision. I tend to draft fast, and then spend a lot of time revising. I would love to have the experience I know some writers have of getting like, really brief notes from their editor, but also my - my editor just is - is, I mean, an editor is editorial, but she's like, editorial on steroids. You know, I get really long edit letters from her. She has tons of ideas, you know, she'll say 'You could do this, or you could do this, or you could do this,' you know, like she's kind of just bursting with ideas. And now I'm actually - I actually have two editors now, because her assistant works with her now on my books, as well. So, every time I get an edit letter, I'm getting notes from both of them. And so, yeah, I get a lot of insight. I get a lot of great ideas from them so, it's really like that. For me, it's about how do I take what I already have, and build it out and make it better and stronger and make the pacing better? You know, so, yeah, I love working with my editor. One thing she's really great at I think is helping me make my characters more - more human, you know, more tender, deepening the relationships. Like, I think because I myself am kind of reserved as a person, and kind of a little guarded, and I tend to write characters who are that way too. And so, it can be, you know, a little challenging for me to figure out how to - how to draw them out of their selves. And Alice, my editor, is really great at helping with that.

Sabrina: I love that. Ah, I have a good one. Do you have any advice on protecting your mental health while querying, or being on submission?

Erica: Yeah, so, I mean, I wish I could say that like the querying is something, you know, that feeling you have when you're querying of kind of vulnerability and - and, you're facing a lot of reject - potential rejection. I wish I could say that that's something that you don't experience any more, after you get a book deal. But, I kind of feel like the writer's life is one of vulnerability and constant potential for rejection. And - and so, I think learning, you know, ways to protect your mental health - early on - is really smart. And, I wish that I had learned more early on. Because you will spend your entire career, no matter how successful you are, you know, writing

Erica: really vulnerable things. You know, you're putting your heart and your soul into your books. And though, you know, your agent might not like them, your editor might say no, you may not get a publisher to take them. Or, even if you do all of those things and you publish a book, readers aren't gonna like it, and they're gonna nitpick, and they're gonna have things to say. And so, yeah, I think it's a really good idea to start learning some techniques. I think one thing that's always been helpful to me, is kind of not putting all my eggs in one basket. And, so, if I - if I have a book out, you know, when I was querying, or you know, if I'm waiting to hear back on a project from my agent or my editor, I'm always working on something new. Because, you know, you can get mired in one project and feel like it's the book of your heart, you know. It's the thing you - that you love - and you want to see it published, and you can cling so hard to that that every no, you know, feels like a blow to you. But I think if you - if you have multiple projects in the works, and you learn to love new projects, and that you're not just one book, you're a writer who can write an endless amount of books, you know. So, I think, always having a new project in the works is really important. I think not spending too much time on social media is really important. Because, you know, like, in the past you, you know, you would only be comparing yourself to people in your circle. People you knew. Now, as a writer, you're comparing yourself to the entire world of writers, you know? Like there's - I have no business comparing myself to Leigh Bardugo, you know?

Sabrina: Like I mean, you're amazing. So, cool.

Erica: Thank you, thank you. But I mean, do you know what I mean? Like you're comparing yourself to just an infinite number of other people at all times. And, when you're on social media all the time, I think, you know, that's just heightened to an intense degree and it can make it feel like no success that you get is ever good enough, you know. So, I'd say always be working on something new, you know. Don't spend too much time on social media. Try not to compare yourself to others as much as you possibly can, even though it's really hard not to do that. And, I think also having a life outside of writing is really important. You know, have hobbies, have relationships, have friends that aren't writers, because it can - it can take over your life and be everything. And, you know, it can feel all-consuming, you know. And, I can tell when I'm starting to get anxious and antsy, and kind of feel like I'm coming out of my skin, it's usually because I've been in front of my screen, doing nothing

Erica: but writing, and being on social media, and I'm like 'I need to just like go take a walk in the woods.' Like, you know, like I need to go engage in a hobby. Watch a TV show. Because, like, you can make everything about your writing. You can have all your - all the TV you watch be for inspiration, all the books you read be in your genre to, you know, help you become a better writer. And, you can, you know, everything that you do becomes something you put on your social media to promote your brand. Like, it can become where your entire life revolves around your writing career. And frankly, it's just not very healthy. So, yeah, I think, I think one thing I would suggest for querying writers is to right now, like before you have an agent or book deal, start cultivating habits that would sustain you through an entire career.

Sabrina: That's such amazing advice. That was such a good one.

Erica: Thank you. [Laughs.]

Sabrina: So, you said that you're a really fast drafter, but you didn't give us like a ballpark. Like, how quick are you usually?

Erica: Yeah, I mean it can vary from book to book, you know, depending on, you know, kind of what I'm working on. But, I would say I can usually draft a book in about three or four months. Sometimes faster if I need to, you know, it just kind of - it can vary a lot. The kind of book I'm working on, is it dual point of view, you know. All of that. So, I think I do draft, not like insanely quickly. I know some people can like, turn out a book in three weeks. That's definitely not me. But yeah, in about 3 months, I can usually have a finished draft, and then I will spend months revising it, you know. And, I've been on this kind of book-a-year schedule with my publisher ever since *Ghost Wood Song*. And, so, I'm always on a deadline pretty much, you know. So, and it tends to be, like, I have to often write in these, like, spurts, you know. And so, my editor, of course, is amazing, and has all these other books she's working on, and, so, it'll be like, "Erica we need this book by September 6<sup>th</sup>", you know, and "You have three weeks to do this round of revision", you know. And it can be a massive revision. And so, I will be doing nothing but sitting at my computer working on that, you know, on that revision for three weeks. Then I'll turn it in, and maybe I'll have a month to like, you know, kind of take a break, or work on something new. So, yeah. There's, I think, the, like, author life, for me at least, and I think for a lot of people, tends to be sort of feast or famine. So,

Erica: you're either like, working at a frantic pace, trying to get something done, you know. Or like, you have a book to promote, and there's like everybody's asking you for something, or it's like it's really quiet. Like, this like long stretch where you're just kind of alone with your book.

Sabrina: And, just like chilling?

Erica: Yeah, just kind of like writing your book and - and - and those can be hard to appreciate because you sort of get used to the like dopamine rush of like 'Ooh, there's an email from my editor,' 'Ooh, this blogger wants this,' and you know, 'They want me to come speak here.' And so, I'm trying to get better about just like really appreciating when I have those quiet moments that I get to be alone with my work, because they're really actually pretty precious, you know, of having kind of quiet and reflection and space to be alone with a book, when it doesn't really belong to anyone else yet. And, that's something I'm starting to learn how to really love.

Sabrina: I love that. Are you a pantsier or a plotter? And has that had to shift?

Erica: Yeah, so, I started out very much as a pantsier. So, I would, you know, start a story and have no idea where it was going. I would start with either a character or a setting and just kind of go, 'We'll see what happens.' That's my like, default setting as a writer. I like that, I like pantsing because I think it's fun. I'm telling myself a story, you know, it's all about discovery. It's really exciting. But, you end up doing a lot of revision, you know, if you do that - which I do. And - and also sometimes you frankly just can't do it if you're on, if you have a book under contract. And so, I have - I have slowly shifted to become something kind of in between a pantsier and a plotter. So, you know, I usually now will have a pitch, you know, that I show my agent. And, I'll try to do either write a whole synopsis for a book - or at least - or maybe a beat sheet, you know, of kind of what can we expect from this book. And, I leave a lot of room though, for discovering and making changes. And, you know, for it's never gonna be, like, I know from start to finish every single thing that's gonna happen. It's more of kind of vague outlines for me, and I sort of fill in as I go. But, yeah, I've definitely had to learn how to be a lot more organized and intentional as a writer because, you know, having a book out a year is - it's a lot.

Sabrina: Yeah, it is. And I mean, having a deadline on it and like, expectations on it, and everything. Yeah, that makes sense. So, you said that you're an underwriter typically, and then. Yeah, you also said that you had, you sent your query out and it was what, 71K, and then 95k, did you say?

Erica: Something around that. Yeah, like I often will add, you know, 20-30 thousand words and - and my drafts tend to get longer. Like, every - every new draft is longer than the one before.

Sabrina: Okay. You don't typically shrink?

Erica: I very rarely shrink. Actually, this revision I just did, I had to cut. This was my first time really needing to cut a lot of stuff. And so, I had to cut a lot of stuff, but I also needed to add a lot. And so, it was at 102,000 when I started this new round, and then I cut a bunch of stuff out, but then I had to add all these things back in, in different places. And, so, it ended up back at 102,000.

Sabrina: Hey! You broke even. There ya go.

Erica: Yeah. So, we'll see what happens with that word count. I think my longest book so, far was *The River Has Teeth*, which I think was like, 103. Which, you know, so, I don't write crazy long books, or crazy short books. They're kind of, you know, I think they're - they're just about, right.

Sabrina: They are as long or short as they need to be to tell the story that you're telling. They're the perfect length. That is, that's the answer. Do you have any tips for anybody who is an underwriter like you?

Erica: I think - yeah, sure. I think, just, I think if you are an underwriter, I think look at what are the things that are missing when you finish it. Then, you know, get to know yourself as a writer. Like, what - what tends to be there, and what tends not to be there. Like, for me, like my characters are anemic, you know, in the first draft, and I have to kind of feed them - you know, build them up a little bit. And so, you know, I know that's one thing I'm gonna have to do, in every second or third draft, is work on my characters and building them out, deepening their relationships with other people. So, I think just kind of getting to know - just who you are as a writer. What are your weaknesses? Where are the places that you need to put more

Erica: attention and more work? And so - that way - you kind of know going into your next draft. Like, what do I want to keep an eye on?

Sabrina: I love that. Where's your favorite place to write?

Erica: So, you know, I mostly write at home. I have an office. I usually, write at my desk, and I usually like to listen to music. Like, I'm pretty boring, in that sense, like I like being at home, I like being in, you know, my usual place, you know, my cup of tea and everything. Like every now and then, if I start feeling really, like, if I feel stuck, sometimes a change of place can work wonders, and that can be as simple as literally taking my laptop and going and sitting on the couch, or it can be going to a coffee shop. Or, you know, like recently I was feeling like I was really struggling to get through revisions and I was like 'Let's change something up.' So, I started listening to music - even though I don't usually listen to music when I write - and it helped. It kind of - like routine is really good, and treating writing like a job for me is really good - but sometimes you do it gets... When it starts feeling like drudgery, I think it's time to go, 'Okay, let's add some fun. Let's infuse something a little different into this mix.'

Sabrina: Give your brain something else to focus on while you're doing it, yeah.

Erica: Yeah, definitely.

Sabrina: You do. You do definitely get in that little 'I'm at my desk, in my bubble'.

Erica: Yes, exactly. And like I tend to do all of my revision especially at my desk, because to me revision is work, But I often will like write, like if I'm drafting, I'll often like, you know, be on the couch with my laptop, because it feels more casual and fun that way. It's kind of more like, it's not work yet. It's just I'm telling a story.

Sabrina: You're just seeing what's up. You just seeing, you're meeting your people and seeing what they're doing and where they're going.

Erica: Yeah, exactly.

Sabrina: I love that. How do you stay organized?

Erica: So, do you know the writer Wendy Heard? She writes young adult mysteries and thrillers, and adult mysteries and thrillers. So, she is a plot genius. And, so, she has this - if you go to her website, she has like a Google doc that's like a beat sheet that's based on *Save the Cat!*. And so, I - I use that a lot early on when I'm trying to go, 'Okay, what's the shape of this story? What all needs to happen?' So, I'll use her beat sheet to sort of lay things out. And then, the only other real like tool I'd say I use is that, like, when I get an edit letter from my editor, or my agent, I will print it out and I'll read it several times. Like, mark it up really well, and then I make myself a revision outline. So, I take her 11-page edit letter and I, you know, say 'Okay. What are the main things she wants me to accomplish? How do I want to accomplish those things?' And I'll have like - just like a - like an outline like you make in college, with like Roman numerals and ABC, you know.

Sabrina: A little beat sheet of your edit letter. I love this.

Erica: Yeah. Like breaking down each thing that I need to do, and that way, like when I'm doing a pass, I'm not trying to accomplish every single thing at once. I'm trying to, you know, work on this one specific thing in each pass, and I can kind of check things off as I go. So, that has made revision a lot more manageable for me.

Sabrina: That's really good advice. I'm gonna have to try that, even just like with my friend's edit letters. That's great.

Erica: It's really helpful. I think, especially if you're a pantsier, and you're someone who kind of dives in, you know, and you're not necessarily someone who likes to approach it from a super organized perspective. I think, even if you draft as a pantsier, you can revise as a plotter, you know, and kind of use some of their tools at the back end. And, I think that can be really helpful.

Sabrina: Yes. Yes. What are your favorite tips for battling writer's block?

Erica: So, I mean I think - I'm not saying that writer's block doesn't exist. I think it does. But, I think it's often a matter of burnout, you know, or it can be maybe fear, you know, like you're afraid of failure, or you feel overwhelmed by the task in front of you. For me, one thing that works is when I am really struggling to bring myself to the page, like just the thought of sitting at my desk for hours, and writing feels just impossible, I just use the 25-minute method, you know. Like I

Erica: set a timer for 25 minutes and I tell myself, ‘You only have to write for 25 minutes.’ You know, at the end of that time, you can get up and go about your life, and that always works for me. Like, I sit down, I write for 25 minutes, and I usually want to keep going, you know. And even if I don't, like if I'm on like, you know, if I have a deadline for example, then I'll take a break and then I'll come back and I'll do another 25 minutes. And so, it becomes these manageable units of time, rather than feeling like I have to sit at my desk for five hours, you know.

Sabrina: ‘I have 24 hours left before bedtime.’ Yeah. Yeah. [Both laugh.]

Erica: So, that, I don't know, I think that just makes it - it makes it more manageable. But then, I think sometimes too, when you feel stuck, it's that your well is empty, and you need to refill it, you know. And so, for me that can be like watching TV shows, going to the woods, going for a walk, listening to new music, you know, talking to a friend, like, or you know, if you have the ability to take a trip and go somewhere new, get - see something new, you know, like our brain craves novelty. And, you know, I think, if you're a writer, and you spend so much of your time sitting at your screen creating things like yeah, of course, sometimes you feel empty and stuck. And so, I think just trying to find ways to refill your well can be really helpful.

Sabrina: Perfect. Do you have any advice on receiving critiques and feedback, especially stuff that may be harder to hear?

Erica: Yeah! So, as I said, I revise a lot. I get long edit letters, you know, from my agents and editor, um, agent and editor. So, I spend a lot of time looking at feedback. I think one thing is - I think when you're an early writer - you feel like you need to get tons of people to look at your book, and get all these different perspectives. Which like, it can be useful, but you can also have too many cooks in the kitchen, you know, and it can muddy your purpose and what you're trying to accomplish. You know, like I've definitely had the experience of like two different people telling me opposite things or, you know, I work on this with, you know, my mentor, and then my editor is like, ‘Actually, I'd like you to do the opposite,’ and it's back to how it was the first time. You know, like, that can happen! And so, I think like ‘Don't have too many cooks in the kitchen to begin with.’ You don't need, you know, a million critique partners. Like having, like one, or two, or three is probably enough, at least for me, you know. I think don't take advice from people that you don't trust - that you



Erica:

don't - whose work that you don't admire. Which is why I, like, I read, I read my reviews, but I don't take writing advice from them. I take writing advice from other writers, you know, who are successful at what they're doing. And so, I think, I think just realizing that even - like everyone can have an opinion about your work, and it's not to say that their opinions aren't valid, or that their opinions aren't true, or don't matter. But, not everybody can give you advice that's useful to you. And so, I think just knowing that, and not trying to feel like you have to take everyone's feedback - just from the outset that's really helpful. When it comes to taking like difficult feedback from people that you trust, and whose feedback you know you want to take, I would say, like, just give yourself some time. Like often, when I first get an edit letter, my immediate response is, you know, 'No! You're wrong! I don't like this! You don't understand my character. You don't understand what I'm trying to accomplish,' you know. And so, I think being willing to - like I never respond immediately. Like, I don't want to respond from that place. So, I usually sit with it for a few days - and just - I might write back and say 'Thank you so, much for your feedback.' you know, 'I'll get back to you once I've had a chance to, you know, look at it,' or whatever. You know, and then give yourself some time with it, read through it several times. And often, if I'm finding that, even after I've given myself some space, you know, usually I'm like, 'Oh yeah, they're right. Okay, we're good. I'll revise.' But, if I find that I'm still not, then often I think it's because they, they might be right that something's wrong with the manuscript, but they are wrong about how to fix it.

Sabrina:

Okay.

Erica:

So, you know, like they might have really misunderstood something, and I might say, well, like, 'I thought it was clear.' But, you know, if they're misunderstanding it, maybe I need to find another way to present it. And like, their idea how to fix it might not be the way to do it, but they're probably right that there's something off, and I need to take another look at it. So, I think just being kind of open, but also realizing it is your book, right? And it's your vision. What do you - what do you want to say? What do you want? What's the shape of the story you're trying to tell? So, I think it is this balance of being open to other people, but also holding true to what you really want to get done. And so, you know, sometimes I'll get feedback where people will say like, 'This feels unrealistic to me,' and it's something from my own lived experience, and I'm like 'Well it can't be too

Erica: unrealistic because I lived it,' you know. But, and I could just say 'No, I'm not gonna change it,' - which sometimes I do - but, I think I could also go 'Okay, how can I retell this in a way that's true to what I experienced, but maybe works a little better for the reader?' So, I don't know. I think - I think responding to critique is a lot about trust. It's about trust in yourself, and trust in other people, and it's a - it's a tricky balance, for sure.

Sabrina: It is, it's really tricky.

Erica: But, I also say sometimes people are just wrong, like right? Like, sometimes you will get not great feedback and you don't have to take it. And you can just say 'Thank you very much for your feedback and insight,' and that's as far as you have to take it. Like, you're not obligated to make to make changes you don't agree with, even if they're from your editor.

Sabrina: Yeah. Well, I mean, look at any reviews on any book, literally, any book. I mean you'll get five stars, and you'll get one stars and they'll be like, 'I love this character' and 'I hate this character.' Everybody walks away from art with a different opinion, so...

Erica: Exactly! Right. Which is why I said that, like I don't take writing advice from reviews, because I find that reviews are so often, more about like, ourselves and our own experiences, than they are about like - the like objective, you know, work itself. Because yeah, like I love it, I'll read reviews sometimes, and it'll be like a one star next to a five-star. They're both about the same thing.

Sabrina: Yes, those are the best ones. [Both laugh.]

Erica: They're pretty funny.

Sabrina: Do you have any - you mentioned Wendy Heard. Do you have any other favorite craft books, or blogs, or both?

Erica: So, I don't tend to use a ton of craft books. Like, it's one of those things where I'm like, 'I should read more craft books,' you know? But I'm usually more interested in just studying, you know, what people are writing themselves. But, I actually do love *Save the Cat!* So, I have a *Save the Cat!* for YA. I'm trying to look around my office for it.

Sabrina: I think mine's over here. I do, oh, I don't know if I have the YA one, I do have the *Writes a Novel* one.

Erica: Oh no, it's the *Writes a Novel* one. Okay, so, *Saves the Cat! Writes a Novel*.

Sabrina: Is there a YA one?

Erica: I think I heard that there's a YA one coming out, which is why I think I said that.

Sabrina: Okay, I want it.

Erica: It's Brody, right, the last name of that author?

Sabrina: Yeah. Jessica Brody

Erica: So, that one's great, I think, especially if you are a plot-, if you're a pantsier. I think a book like *Save the Cat!* can be really helpful to you, when you're like, even if you've written a draft, you can kind of go, 'Have I hit all these beats?' you know. So, that's when I actually do use that one. I use it a little bit for every project I write.

Sabrina: I like that one, for like, helping you plot. I think what you're saying is like as a pantsier, because it's not necessarily 'Plan out every scene.' It's figuring out the character arcs. But yeah, no that's an amazing one. I love that one! So, speaking of amazing writing, you have such strong settings and like, descriptions and atmosphere and just general vibes. Do you have any advice for writers who struggle with this kind of things - on how to bring those out better?

Erica: Yeah, sure. So, like for me story often begins with setting, like with *The River Has Teeth*. I had this very specific setting in mind that was kind of cobbled together from a few different nature parks in Nashville. And then like, my third book, *The Restless Dark*, like I visited this canyon in Georgia and was just so, struck by it. So, I often start from place, and for me it's a matter of kind of immersing myself in a place, and getting to know it really well. So, like I said, for *The River Has Teeth*, I actually took a naturalist class. And so, you know, I learned the names of all the plants that I was seeing, and the birds that I was seeing. Because I think you can say you

Erica: know, 'I, you know, walked through the woods, and there were, you know, all these plants with white flowers.' But it's - but if you can say like, you know, 'I walked through the snakeroot and, you know, the thistle and, you know, ironweed,' you know, you can convey, like, a sense of belonging and a connection to place just by knowing place names, and having a really strong sense of the things that surround you. So, I think if you want to write about a place, or set a novel in a specific place, I think trying to immerse yourself in it as much as you can. Which you know, if you live close to it, means spend a lot of time there. Like really look around you. If you don't live there, of course you could use, you know, Google Maps. You can watch videos, you can I think, just anything you can do to kind of immerse yourself in setting can be really helpful. And, I think that can help with kind of building atmosphere too, right? Like, I like spending time out in the woods not just because it's peaceful, but honestly because I find it frightening. You know, that feeling of like being in the woods on a foggy morning, and just, you know, I can write that well because I've experienced it enough, you know. I've been there, feeling those feelings of kind of - looking around me and not being able to make out far ahead and - and if - hearing like a twig break and, you know, that - kind of - those feelings you get when you're - when you're both kind of in awe with nature but also a little frightened of it. So, I think just seeking out those experiences that put you in close contact with a setting, and like learning how to take those feelings that you're having in that setting and kind of get them on the page. At least, that's what that's what I'm trying to do.

Sabrina: That's really smart. Okay, you wanta do some book questions?

Erica: Okay.

Sabrina: Okay, for people who haven't read yet, do you want to give us a little bit on – well, I guess we don't need to do *Ghost Wood Song*. You did your whole query.

Erica: Oh yeah, yeah. Okay they know what *Ghost Wood Song's* about.

Sabrina: You wanta tell us a little bit about *The River Has Teeth*?

Erica: Yeah! So, that one is set in Tennessee. And so, basically Natasha - one of the main characters - her sister goes missing, and her car is found at the edge of a nature preserve. And, when the police kind of

Erica: can't turn up any leads, she starts going looking for answers on her own. And that leads her to Della, whose family of witches lives near the nature park, and has done for generations. And so, Della agrees to help Natasha. But she, Della's hiding a secret of her own, which is that she thinks her mom - who's been turned into a monster by a spell that went wrong - she thinks her mom might actually be responsible for Natasha's sister's disappearance. And, so, they sort of team up to kind of uncover what's going on in this - in this nature preserve. And, so, it's a book about, you know, kind of monsters and magic. And, kind of, it's definitely dealing a lot with violence against women and misogyny. And, so, there's a love story between Della and Natasha, which was really fun to write, because they're kind of polar opposites.

Sabrina: They're so, different!

Erica: Yeah, very much like - a little bit enemies - to lovers, I guess. And, you know, they have all these secrets and all these things, you know, especially Della has all these secrets she's keeping. And so, yeah, it was kind of a fascinating book to write, and I had a really good time with that one.

Sabrina: Yeah, they're both - they're both so beautiful. So, what inspired you? I'm still talking about *Ghost Wood Song* and *The River Has Teeth*, by the way, even though we didn't go into it. What inspired you for both of those? Like, how did you get the, you know, the ghost raising fiddle idea? And then, I don't want to get into too much on *The River Has Teeth*, yeah.

Erica: Yeah, it's easy to get into spoiler territory.

Sabrina: It is! Let's go with the fiddle.

Erica: Yeah, so, for *Ghost Wood Song*, it's actually kind of a funny story. So, I used to have my - my office was upstairs in the attic. And, I was home alone one day, when I heard banjo music coming from downstairs and I'm like, 'All right, I'm home alone. Why am I hearing banjo music?' You know, and it was a little creepy. And so, I'm like creeping down the stairs, I'm still hearing the music, and I come into the room where the banjo is, and you know, the banjos there, it's hanging on the wall. Nobody's home. And so, I was just

Erica: like – it was like, I kind of was unnerved by it. But, it made me start thinking about like - like if a ghost were playing a banjo what would they be trying to say or communicate, you know? Yeah. And so, that kind of got me to thinking about, like, kind of bluegrass music and ghosts, and I ended up changing the instrument to be a fiddle instead of a banjo, because I think it's just more evocative of what I was trying to do. And so, yeah, I just got kind of fascinated by the idea of the connection between ghosts and bluegrass and - and the novel kind of just built up – built itself up from there.

Sabrina: I love that so much! That's amazing. That's awesome.

Erica: Yeah, and then, like, *The River Has Teeth* was I think a lot more inspired just by setting, by these parks I'd spent a lot of time in, you know, and just had - had really wanted to set something there because they just - they like the land itself, just had this presence, you know. Like it felt more than - like it felt more than kind of aware, than land should feel to me at times. And so, that's really kind of where I just started thinking about like, 'What kind of people would live here? What kind of story might take place in a place like this? And *The River Has Teeth* built itself up from there.

Sabrina: Oh cool, I did not know – that's incredible. I would not have guessed. But, it also makes perfect sense that you start with setting and atmosphere and then build up that. That's so interesting.

Erica: Yeah, and I mean it's not every book, you know, like my third book definitely started with setting - a hundred percent started with setting. But, then the book I'm writing now, kind of started more with like - more with like themes and kind of just things I'd always wanted to do in a novel. Which, I'll look forward to talking about that more in the future.

Sabrina: Yeah. Okay, do you want to tell us about *The Restless Dark* and what it's about, and your main character?

Erica: Yeah, so, *The Restless Dark* is - I guess you could call it psychological horror - probably might be the best description for it. But, it is about three girls who team up in a true - true crime contest - to find the missing body of a killer who leapt to his death in Cloud Kiss Canyon, which is this eerie, foggy canyon in North Georgia. And so, they team up in this contest to find the bones. One of them, Lucy, was the serial killer's last attempted victim. She got away

Erica: from him two years ago, and she's returned to the canyon to try to find some peace and resolution. And, one of the other characters is Carolina, who is someone who worries that she has a lot of darkness inside her. And, I think worries a little bit that she might be like, the serial killers, you know, she hears about on this podcast that she loves. And the third is Maggie, who's a psychology student, who's there to study the contest from a kind of an academic standpoint. And so, these three team up in this contest and weird, scary stuff, starts happening. And - and soon they think that there might be an actual living killer in their midst. So, yeah, it's a kind of paranormal horror kind of thriller.

Sabrina: Super high concept too, yeah. True crime contest what?

Erica: Yeah, and I don't know if I said it's hosted - it's hosted by a podcast, like a true crime podcast called Human Beasties, which is kind of - of a dark humored, you know, along the lines of a lot of the kind of murder podcast that we've come to, you know, love and hate in equal measure.

Sabrina: I'm so excited about it. It sounds so good. I mean, I have already fallen in love with your other novels, so, I have no doubt I'm gonna just devour this one. But that is so fun! Did you want to read an excerpt?

Erica: Oh, sure! Yeah, I can definitely do that.

Sabrina: Oh my God! You're gonna be my first excerpt.

Erica: Oh really?

Sabrina: Yes! Okay, I'm ready.

Erica: How about I just read the first page? Is that okay?

Sabrina: Yes!

Erica: All right. So, this is Chapter 1, day one from Lucy's perspective: "This is where he jumped, where he edged out past the wooden barrier onto the lichen covered rocks. Where he gripped the trunk of a twisted pine and gazed into the depths below. I remember his face was ghostly white against the fog, his dark eyes wide. He looked between the police and the yawning canyon, and chose the canyon.

Erica: He leapt into the mist. I spent half an hour with the Cloud Kiss killer, but the thing I think about most is the moment of his death. The space against the sky, where he was - until he wasn't. I stare at it now. The lone white pine clinging to the side of the cliff. The green brown mountains in the distance, barely visible through the fog. He must be dead, because no one could survive that fall. Not even a monster like Joseph Kincaid, but the police never found his body. They searched the canyon for days and days. And all they found was a shoe.”

Sabrina: Aah. I just got goosebumps! [Both laugh.] Oh, I love it! Oh, that’s so fun! Thank you for sharing with us.

Erica: Yeah, of course!

Sabrina: Is it still on track to come out on the 4th?

Erica: Yeah. So, it's gonna be out on October 4th. It'll be out in hardcover, audio book and eBook.

Sabrina: So, exciting! Hmm. Okay. So, was there any - you did talk about the canyon, but was there any other kind of unique or fun research you ended up having to do for this one - if it doesn't get too spoilery?

Erica: Yeah. I mean, I did some research on like, the canyon. Like, I had a canyon I'd visited called Cloudland Canyon, which is in, I guess, northeast Georgia, which I kind of loosely based the canyon in this book on. And so, I kind of got to know again like local flora fauna. Kind of what to expect, you know, in this landscape. So, I had to do some of that. And, I also did some research on serial killers. On both - on both male and female serial killers. And it was really illuminating, and - and honestly - really sad research. I think, especially the research on female serial killers, made me really, really sad. Because I think like, I don't know, you know, we've come to think about - we think a lot about serial killers. They kind of loom large, I think, and, you know, in the American imagination. And, I think, you know, if you spend any time literally, like reading not just about like the bad things they do, but kind of like who they are as people, you know, like their histories. It's just, there's so, much darkness, and so much sadness, you know. I think it's - it's kind of incredible how much of a sort of sensationalized thing serial killers have become, when you really sit down and, like, look at them closely. Like, to me, like when I think about them, all I feel is just so



Erica: sad. Like, there's just so - there's just, like, from start to finish - to me, everything to do with serial killers is really, really sad. But, I also realize that we are just so fascinated by them. And then, I am too, you know. There's a reason that true crime makes so, much money and there's a - there's a lot of reasons that we're also drawn to it, and I think I explore a lot of those in the book.

Sabrina: That's so, interesting! I'm so, excited to read. Okay, and you can do this. Oh, actually before we do that, *The Gathering Dark* just came out, and you have a short story in that.

Erica: Yeah!

Sabrina: Yes, Aden, I just, Aden will be my number four, and yeah, he's in there too. So, you talked about it a little bit, but what is your, what was your inspiration on your short? And what's it called?

Erica: So, my short story, is the first one, and it's called "Stay". And so, it's about a girl who - who has a family cemetery that she's responsible for tending. But she lets - she lets it go too long, and doesn't take care of it because she's so, busy dealing with other things. And so, when phantom fingers - fingerprints start appearing on her skin, she has to kind of deal with the - the dead - who have grown restless. And so, that story was inspired in large part by - so, where I'm from, in north central Florida, kind of out in the country. Which people don't really think of as country, but it's really, really country out in north central Florida. A lot of us have our own family cemeteries that are just like little small, family plots, like out, you know, you're driving down a long highway and you'll see them, kind of dotted along the edge of the road.

Sabrina: Oh, that's so, interesting.

Erica: Yeah. So, my family has one. That's where my grandparents, and my aunts and uncles, and my dad are all buried. And, my sister actually lives next door to it, which is kind of funny. She can, like, see it from her porch. But, I don't know. I got to thinking about, you know, like I mean to me like the family cemetery, like personally, is actually really nice. You know, like her kids go play there. They talk to my dad, like, their grandpa who died, you know. Like it's sweet.

Sabrina: Yeah, no, that is super sweet!

Erica: Yeah. It's nothing bad, but you know in the manner of all horror writers, of course, I turned it into something monstrous, because that's what we do.

Sabrina: I mean, yeah.

Erica: Yeah. So, you know, in my - it becomes a way to kind of look at, I guess, you know, generational trauma and - and the roles that we play in our families, and the ties we have to our families and - and, you know, whether good or bad, you know what those might look like. But yeah, I would love to definitely praise *The Gathering Dark* because it isn't as - it's truly a phenomenal anthology. Like, obviously, I'm biased. I have a story in it, but, just reading it as a reader like, which I've been doing over the last few weeks, it's really beautifully edited. Like, the stories flow into each other, they all belong to each other, you know. Like it's really - like it's an impressive - it's an impressive anthology, I think.

Sabrina: Nice! It's on my list. I haven't, I haven't dived in yet, but – it's kind of like you, there's just so many things going on. I have a stack with my bags. I'm super excited to read it! Yeah.

Erica: There's so many good stories that I like a lot. Like, Aden Polydorus's story is phenomenal. Courtney Gold has one in there that's amazing. Shakira Tucson's story, which is just spectacular. It's the last one in there. So, like, I really can find something nice to say about every story in that anthology.

Sabrina: How was it working on one? Was it fun?

Erica: It was! Like, I wasn't super involved in anything past my own, you know, writing my own and revising it for them, but I had the best time writing that story. Like, I sat down and wrote it almost all in one sitting, and it was kind of just like a like - almost like a little trance, you know. It just flowed out. It was a totally different experience from writing a novel, because I didn't have to worry about plotting this huge, you know. Like, I could focus more on the things that I think I'm really good at, which is, like, atmosphere and language. And so, I had the best time writing that story and all of the contributors are amazing, and I got to do an event on launch day with Tori Bovalino, who edited it, and Hannah Whitten. And that was really, really fun. Like, we talked about the book, and we talked

Erica: about horror movies, and kind of, I don't know, it was just, it was a blast. So, the whole experience has been really positive.

Sabrina: How fun! Oh, I love that! Were you working within like a word count parameters kind of deal, as well?

Erica: Yeah, like it was specific, you know, specific word count. And like, when Tori initially invited me, she's like 'You know, this is kind of how we're envisioning full core, kind of - these are what we're looking for.' So, you know, I knew the basic parameters and I just had to, you know, write a story that kind of loosely fit within those parameters. And so, like all of the stories, you know, bring something a little bit different, and interpret kind of folk horror in a slightly different way, I think, which is really interesting.

Sabrina: Yeah, that's the most fun thing about anthologies is that you get all these amazing different writers. I mean, you could even give them probably all the same exact story to interpret, and they'd probably all come out different. I would love to read an anthology like that.

Erica: Yeah. I actually like, you know, Aden's story, which was interpreting the Bloody Mary myth. And I - after reading his - I was like, 'I really want to write a Bloody Mary story,' because that's like the mythology from my childhood that I - that was so, terrifying to me. And, then I still think about all the time, even as an adult.

Sabrina: Like you, I think about Bloody Mary a lot – like, more often than I should. Like, when I'm by a mirror, or whatever, like, and it's dark. I'm just like 'Don't - don't do it.'

Erica: Don't look.

Sabrina: Don't do it.

Erica: Don't look in the mirror too long. Yeah.

Sabrina: Yes. Okay, you want to do some really fun little questions?

Erica: Yes!

Sabrina: This can be, this can be anthology or any of your novels. Who is your favorite character to write?

Erica: I would say Della, from *The River Has Teeth*. Getting to write her magic was really cool, and I think she's just an interesting person. I think Della is kind of like who I'd like to be, a little bit. You know, like she's - she's - she's incredibly loyal, and resilient, and feels really deeply. I don't know. I just - I mean like there are some characteristics of hers I would prefer not to have. But I think - just like writing her - I really feel like - I think she's the best character I've written, so far. And, she was someone I felt really proud of.

Sabrina: She's so interesting!

Erica: Thank you. Yeah.

Sabrina: And her - her magic was really cool. I loved her magic. Yeah.

Erica: I had the best time. So, like, one thing I, like, really love is fungi and mushrooms. Like, I'm just kind of fascinated by them. And so, like learning more about like, kind of the like, you know, wood wide network. You know, the underground kinds of connections between things. Like, that was really fascinating, and I had a good time kind of figuring out how to weave that into her magic. It was really fun.

Sabrina: Those are really fun parts to read through, as well. Like, I felt like I was learning so much.

Erica: So, that was just me, like, geeking out.

Sabrina: I love it! I love it, I love it so much. Okay, what was your favorite location to write?

Erica: It's - I think it's gonna be a toss-up between *The River Has Teeth*, the bend in *The River Has Teeth*, because that was really fun. And, like I said, I got to do cool, like, hands-on research for that, you know? But, I also had a really good time writing the location for *The Restless Dark*, writing this creepy, eerie canyon, filled with fog. I had a really good time writing that, and I think I got to draw on a lot of - kind of my personal feelings - of feeling afraid in the foggy woods, which was, which was kind of interesting. And, it was just like - it was - it was like the whole book is contained within the canyon, you know.

Sabrina: That's awesome!

Erica: Like, they never leave it during the book. And so, it was kind of this, you know, you can do kind of a monster in the house sort of thing, you know. Like it's all the characters in the canyon.

Sabrina: I love that!

Erica: And so, that was, that was a new challenge and really interesting to write.

Sabrina: Which character are you most like?

Erica: I would say, the character I'm most like, is one of the characters people dislike the most, when I read reviews, which is uh, Sarah from *Ghost Wood Song*.

Sabrina: Oh, interesting. Okay.

Erica: Shady's love interest. Like, she's like kind of prickly, very introverted. She's guarded, she doesn't trust easily. She's very ambitious, you know. I think she reminds me a lot of myself. And, I think I did - I think I did put a fair bit of myself into Sarah.

Sabrina: I like Sarah, for the record.

Erica: Thank you.

Sabrina: I liked her a lot. Are you good with names, or do they just come to you? And like, who was the hardest to name?

Erica: So, names, I find names pretty fun, actually. So, I like to go to cemeteries - like especially really old ones and look at names. Like, I've gotten some cool character names that way. Names are not something I struggle with. They do come fairly easily to me. Though, I will say I struggle with place names, coming up with the names of towns, you know. And sometimes, last names can be kind of challenging, and I end up looking at a lot of, like, regional surname lists, just to try to find ones that make sense. For place names, like sometimes, you know, I'm - I'll, like, look at my bookshelves and I'll, you know, pull a word off, or pull an author named off, and then twist it to make a place name or, you know, that kind of thing.

Sabrina: Oh, I love that. That's fun. Okay, you said, you can't give us a hint of what you're working on now.

Erica: I mean, I can tell you that it's a dark academian ghost story, set at college.

Sabrina: And YA.

Erica: And YA, yeah.

Sabrina: Oh, but, that's cool. That's cool. That's really good to know. Ooh, I'm excited about that Erica dark academia.

Erica: Yeah, I love this book. Like, I had the most fun writing it! And like, you know, it's the first time I've written, I think it's like the biggest kind of friend cast I've written. And that was really fun to write, and I got to kind of pull out a lot of - sort of - my love of gothic literature and dark academia, which I also love, and do some - I think - some new things with it. So, yeah, it's been really fun. I'm really looking forward to being able to talk about it and share about it pretty soon.

Sabrina: Nice. Is it a fictionalized school?

Erica: Yes, it's completely fictional. It's not set at like Yale or anything.

Sabrina: Yeah, okay, cool. Okay, are there any recently released or upcoming books you'd like to recommend?

Erica: So, definitely *The Gathering Dark*, edited by Tori Bovalino. Yes. So, *It Looks Like Us* by Alison Ames. I think the release date got changed on that one. So, I'm not sure when that's coming out, but it's kind of an eco-horror that's set in a snowy location, which was new for me. I read an early copy of that book and really liked it. I would also say *Hell Followed With Us*, by -

Sabrina: A.J. White

Erica: Yes, A. J. White. Thank you. I thought that one was brilliant, and I've been really pleased to see how successful it's been, because it's a really, really good book. It was riveting, when I read it. And I think, just accomplishes a lot. And yeah, so, those are two – one's out,

Erica: one's, I think, coming out soon, that I would definitely recommend. I think those are brilliant!

Sabrina: Nice. And then do you want to tell everyone where we can find you, and your books?

Erica: Sure. Yeah, so, my website is just ericawaters.com, and I have Buy links to all of my books on there. And then, you can also find me on Twitter as @ELWaters. Although that account's kind of just news and updates - news and updates these days. I'm a little more active on Instagram, and there I am @ericawatersbooks. So, that's a good place to find me.

Sabrina: Awesome. And then, when you do venture over to Erica's website, go look at Blog page, because there's a really great, How I Got My Agent post on there. You've got the *Ghost Wood Song* query letter on there. You've got a lot of - a lot of fun, little helpful resources for - for writers, if they want to take a peek, and gives a better idea of Erica's journey, and all that. Yay! I can't believe we did it! We got through it all! We did so good! Thank you! I had the best time! This was so, awesome. And this is full of so, much awesome information, too. I'm super excited. Thank you.

Erica: Thank you so much for having me on your podcast! It was a blast. It was so fun to talk about querying, and publishing, and writing, and books. So, thank you, and thank you to all the listeners for joining us and yeah, thanks a lot!

Sabrina: Thank you.

Erica: Thanks everybody.

Sabrina: Bye!

Erica: Bye!

Sabrina: Okay y'all! That's all for Episode 5 of LitTea! You can find a Content List and all the Erica links in the Show Notes page of my website. Thanks so much for joining us! Okay Ginny, say goodbye!

Ginny: Ruff! [Barks.]

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**In This Episode:**

Goosebumps Series by R.L. Stein

John Saul

Shadows by John Saul

Shadow and Bone Trilogy by Leigh Bardugo

Daughter of Smoke and Bone Series by Laini Taylor

Emily Dickenson

Raymond Carver

The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner

Nutmeg & Luna - Erica's dogs

Pitch Wars

The Raven Boys (The Raven Cycle Series) by Maggie Stiefvater

The Twilight Saga by Stephenie Meyer

Lauren Spieller - literary agent at TriadaUS Literary Agency

Publisher's Marketplace

Alice Jerman (Erica's editor at HarperTeen)

HarperTeen

Wendy Heard

Save the Cat! Writes a Novel by Jessica Brody

Save the Cat! Writes a Young Adult Novel: The Ultimate Guide to Writing a Young Adult Bestseller by Jessica Brody (coming 2023)

The Gathering Dark: An Anthology of Folk Horror (with special shoutouts to: editor Tori Bovalino and contributors Aden



Polydoros, Courtney Gould, Shakira Toussaint, and Hannah F.  
Whitten)

It Looks Like Us by Alison Ames

Hell Followed With Us by Andrew Joseph White

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**Erica's Books:**

Ghost Wood Song

The River Has Teeth

The Gathering Dark: An Anthology of Folk Horror

"Stay"