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Sam Sykes

252: The Emotional Weight of Storytelling

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.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/252, because it's Episode 252.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of speaking with Sam Sykes. Sam is incredibly tall and has also written multiple books; including the Bring Down Heaven trilogy, and the Affinity for Steel trilogy, and comics such as Brave Chef Brianna. He currently lives in the United States with his two hounds and, at any given time, is probably yelling at something inanimate.

Tome of the Undergates was his first book, but is far from his last. He looks forward to being one of the sole providers of fantasy entertainment, assuming no other authors are actually discovered in the next forty years. His latest book, and start of his new fantasy series, Seven Blades in Black, is what we are going to be discussing today. Welcome, Sam. It is so great to have you on the show.

Sam Sykes: Hi there.

GP: So, before we get started, I have to ask because inquiring minds need to know, where were you on the night of October 17th, 2003; said in my most interrogative voice?

SS: I've already told everything I'm going to tell to the Phoenix Police Department.

GP: That sounded ominous.

SS: I can't just tell you that.

GP: I know, right? Like, why dangle that carrot? That's just so, ah. So, anyway, I wanted to talk to you today about Seven Blades in Black, which is your latest adventure series fantasy series. I think by the time this airs, it'll be out already. Can you talk a little bit about, before we get started, where this idea came from, what the book is or what the series is and sort of the backstory, the story behind the story, just to give our listeners some context?

SS: Seven Blades in Black is about this war-torn land between two rival nations, the Imperium which is this nation of ultra-decadents mages who have ruled the world since time immemorial, and the revolution; also known as the Glorious Revolution of Fist & Flame, which was their former non-magical servants, who were sent to this land to colonize it, but ended up developing machinery and combustion technology, and then used that to overthrow their former Lords.

And, now, there's a massive war between them as they struggle for dominance, just this sort of untamed wild land, where people eke out like the hardest of livings. And, in it all, is a woman named

Sal the Cacophony, who is a vagrant. Vagrant in this world are a term for rogue renegade mages who sort of use their powers to further themselves, and don't really give a crap about who they hurt.

But Sal is a woman who has a list of names of people who have wronged her, and she spends Seven Blades in Black hunting down seven of those names. And, we get to learn, why; as she goes through this journey. The idea, I don't know, I always feel like somewhat, there should be like some epic tale about inspiration and adversity or some-- But the truth is I just thought a girl with a magic gun would be pretty cool, so then I just started building around that idea.

GP: I mean, that's just like, so cool. Like the idea that's like, girl with magic gun and then you build the story around it. I mean, isn't that the way it is with a lot of writing though, that we often have like this one concept or this nugget, and then that's what we end up-- Like that's sort of, we go, 'oh, that's kind of cool'. And then we sort of build the story around it.

SS: Honestly, because I've been writing professionally for about 10 years now, I think. One of the many things I've learned is that like the older you get, the more you become okay with 'I don't know' as an answer. With my first novel, I had this whole idea that like I had to have this great sweeping backstory about it, what the idea was and what I was trying to do.

And it was super pretentious, but I felt I needed to justify the backstory because I didn't have enough confidence in my own writing at the time. It's taken me until now to realize that, but you know, with Seven Blades in Black, I've been doing this for a long time so I'm very comfortable just saying like, "Yeah, no, I thought this would be neat and decided to build a story around it."

GP: Love it. You know, the other thing too, and you sort of touched on this already, the setup, right. That we've got these two realms and then there's sort of the in-between space; the scar, that's like the in-between area or the no man's land between the two countries basically; or two areas. And so like, there is a structure there. I mean, you say, yes, you had this idea, 'girl with a magic gun'; and then you just built around it.

But like as a reader, as I'm reading the, you know, as I go through the book, I get the sense that there is a backstory; it's just not all being revealed immediately. So, at what point do you-- You talked about like sort of trusting that you don't need to ask why, or you don't need to understand, like, I don't know is an okay answer for now. At what point do you start to see the world come together in writing this book in the series.

SS: The world comes together as incidental to the characters coming together. Every ounce of world-building and magic systems doesn't mean anything, unless it impacts the character. The world exists primarily in how it affects the characters. Like, I'm a guy who plays a lot of video games and I grew up playing RPGs. A lot of the times, there's stuff that just happens there. I always remember thinking like, 'oh my God; like, why there, why are these creatures here and not here?'

I had so much fun figuring that out. So long as the world-building is coherent, so long as people know what's going on in the story; it's a good idea to leave certain things unexplained so long as they're not like, you know, distractingly unexplained. Like, if they're central to the plot and they're unexplained, then that's pointless.

But if they're unexplained just interesting bits, then there's actually an immense amount of power in choosing not to explain them. It's something I call the Kessel Run Principle, which is oddly pretentious. But it kind of demonstrates what I'm talking about pretty quickly. I'm going to go out on a limb and say a lot of your audience has probably seen Star Wars, Episode Four, A New Hope.

In it, when Luke Skywalker meets the rogue pilot, Solo; and Han is trying to convince him of his ship's capability. Han says, "The Millennium Falcon made the Kessel Run in 12 parsecs." Like, once I heard that, I didn't need to know what the Kessel Run was to be enamored with it, because instantly, my mind went ablaze with like, 'oh, what is the Kessel Run like? What could that be?'

In my head, it became like running a blockade. Eventually, they revealed that it's just a series of black holes, I guess. But at that point, like I felt a certain twinge of disappointment. Black holes are cool and there's nothing wrong with that, but it wasn't as cool as what I had in my head.

GP: Right. As the audience member, like you kind of built a picture of what Kessel Run means, and that was infinitely more interesting than anything that could have been created for the movie Solo.

SS: Exactly. That's not to say that was bad. It's just like the Kessel Run had so much more power when we didn't know what it was.

GP: Right. I love that idea. I might reference the, you know, Sam Sykes' Kessel Run Principle or whatever it is that you said, because that's just like awesome. That's such a great way of explaining it too. I have to say just a little nerdy aside, one of the things that really drives me crazy with the whole Kessel Run in 12 parsecs thing, is that parsec is not a measure of time.

SS: Yeah. But like, even that feeds into the principle of the Kessel Run, because then it's like, oh, 12 parsecs are a unit of time in this world. So, that's another instance in which, kind of, their language and their slang, gets built up without us realizing. And, we feel like we're somewhere else without someone actively looking us in the face and saying like, "Hey, you know, you're somewhere else."

GP: Exactly. So, in terms of creating this somewhere else, like you've already given us kind of the premise; that we've got the Imperial, the Imperium, and all these mages. I mean, it seems almost like a futile system only instead of land, magic is kind of the determining factor that decides whether you're of the elite or the non-elite.

And then you've got this like industrialized or pseudo pre-industrial group in the revolutionaries. So, as you developed this world; can you talk a little bit about sort of the major players, the characters that are major players in these worlds and sort of how the world built around them?

SS: Well, like our main character is Sal the Cacophony and we learned that she had something special that she lost. You know, I don't want to spoil anything, but a lot of the stories about her, about us figuring out what she lost and what she's trying to get back, but what she lost led to her making that list of names and also led to her finding a gun that she calls the Cacophony, from which she takes her namesake.

And, the Cacophony is a gun that basically shoots magic. He has like special spells inscribed on his bullets. And, I call it a 'him' because in the book, they always refer to it as like a person, not a gun. There's a reason behind that.

So, she sort of shaped war world of Vagrants and, you know, sort of this concept of renegade mages; and how that would be horrifying in real-life because, you know, the idea of someone that has all this power and is accountable to no one is terrifying. But, you know, once I started building Sal the Cacophony, I wanted like, who else is like her? An interesting world-building tip is Sal has tattoos.

She has a pair of half sleeves of birds and clouds and so forth; and there's a reason for that. But I thought it was, I just like-- I added that for no other reason than, you know, that sounds cool and kind

of punk; but then that sort of became a thing with all the other vagrants that I created is that they all have tattoos somewhere of their namesake.

So, like we meet a guy named Koto, the hard rock, which is actually a low-key reference to an anime I once liked. But, you know, he has a mountainous scene tattooed across his back. We have Taltho, the Scourge, who has dead trees tattooed on his hands and so forth. That's just like a neat little detail, but it's something visually arresting about a character that gives them like a lot of information just at a glance, you know?

GP: And, it kind of helps the reader to then be able to identify and keep track of these characters, especially since, you know, Sal is going after each of these seven guys or these seven mages.

So, you know, her, she's easy for us to keep track of because she's just the one person that we're following the whole time. But the other people, like it can feel almost like a revolving door, like, okay, you know, who's the next mage, what's going on? And, this way, we have some sort of anchoring detail that allows us to understand, you know; what their magic is, who they are, and keep them straight in our heads.

SS: Yeah. Another way to keep track of them is by the impact they have on Sal throughout her story. Like, the actual mages are cool and so forth, but what really matters is the impact they have and how they raise the stakes and how they change the story. So, that's Sal and the vagrants. There are three main characters; well, four, technically.

The other one is her friend, confidant, and sometimes lover, Liette, who is also known as Twenty-Two Dead Roses in a Chipped Porcelain Vase, and she is a Freemaker. In this world, there is a cast of rigidly outbound scholars dedicated to pursuing knowledge at almost all costs known as the Freemakers. They're considered extremely problematic for both the revolution and the Imperium because they build device of massive destructive capabilities that alter the landscape politically and physically, and are also accountable to no one.

So, they live underground metaphorically and go by pseudonyms like Twenty-Two Dead Roses in a Chipped Porcelain Vase, Two Lonely Old Men, A Dead Dog Buried on a Black Hill. And again, that's just stuff that I thought was neat, but like the more I played with it, the more I realized it was like, 'all right, why do they call themselves that?'

So, because they're probably illegal, and why are they illegal? Well, because they sort of are a system of power outside the existing systems of power, and the existing systems of power don't like that. She's a lot of fun. She is a very-- She's basically an insufferable nerd, which is one of my very favorite archetypes to write. I love obsessive characters and sort of with a nerd, you have carte blanche to be obsessive about them because they obsess about things.

It's been a domain we typically thought of as reserved only for dudes; like nerdy girls or nerdy women characters often get portrayed as like, you know, sagely, kind, all-knowing, enlightened. So, it was really fun to write a woman character who was just insufferable and annoying, and by design, I think there's a lot of power in giving that kind of humanity to a character in sort of celebrating their awkwardness and weirdness.

GP: Liette is the second sort of prominent character. You used her to kind of build out the Freemakers, as it were. What other characters-- You mentioned there's three, possibly four.

SS: Yeah. The third man character is a dude named Cavric, who is a Low Sergeant in The Revolution. He's a true believer. He grew up in The Revolution. He believes in its message of restoring equality and making life better. He sort of ends up as the central crux of an important arc, but his whole journey is sort of realizing that the world is a lot uglier than he thought.

And a lot of that ugliness comes from his own cause that he believed in, his whole arc is figuring out like, well, what's he going to do now that he knows what he knows, and the path he takes. He sort of forms-- He forms one-half of the revolution outlook, and the other half is formed by our possibly fourth character, Tretta Stern. In Seven Blades in Black, there's almost two stories.

There's the story of Sal making her way through this list or across the land and figuring out her list and so forth, and learning more about her. That all takes place in the past, from her perspective; but in the present, she's about to be executed by The Revolution. She has one last chance to tell her story and she wants to because her story means a lot to her, for reasons we discover. But Tretta Stern is her interrogator. She's a Governor-Militant of a stronghold.

She's in charge of her execution, and she's in charge of her interrogation. And she is like a true, true believer, like a fanatic; her will is iron and she has no doubts, and she knows exactly what she wants to do and exactly how she's going to do it. She's a lot of fun. Like, every story needs at least one character who does not bend. Those characters are always useful because they force everyone else to figure out a way to deal with them.

They're relentless. You know, it can be even as-- In my last book, God's Last Breath, it was a character named Asper who began the story as kind of a gentle priestess and ended up as kind of a war leader. She was the character that did not bend because she knew in her heart that she had to help people, and she figured out the best way to do that.

But like, she refused to bend and Tretta is the same, but in a much more militant bend; like she does not bend. And, it makes the story immensely more interesting to have someone who cannot be placated. You know, one way or another, this character has to be confronted and dealt with. Like, it can't be, she can't be tricked, she can't be deceived, and she can't be negotiated with.

GP: It kind of reminds me of The Terminator. Like, you know, it will not be stopped, it cannot be reasoned with. Like that sort of idea, but like that, it just it is relentless. It is what it is. And, that's what forces the characters to stand up and do something because they can't run away.

SS: Right. Exactly. I think if every character is like that, it limits growth. But if there's a character who just refuses to compromise basically, then that makes for a very interesting story. You just need-- You kind of need like a diversity of voices, and mindsets, and attitudes to make an interesting story.

GP: Absolutely. I mean, just, you know, using The Terminator as an example, like The Terminator character that can't be stopped, that can't be reasoned with, if all of the characters, like if Sarah Connor was like that, then the story would stop. Like we basically, it's like, you're stuck between a rock and a hard place, right? Like, there's nowhere to go, but because you have--

Like in the second Terminator, Sarah is actually more that character, right? Like, she's the a one that's more implicable or, you know, like who's sort of more relentless, but then The Terminator, Arnold Schwarzenegger's character actually kind of has some growth in them. So like, you kind of need one character that is the one that's going to challenge everyone else to grow.

SS: Yeah, exactly. You know, that was a very interesting thing that James Cameron did with that movie, where the robot becomes the one to start because then his whole story changes. He's no longer the implacable foe. Now, he's trying to figure out what it means to be human.

GP: Exactly, exactly. It, kind of, turns the trope on its head. And then you have the character who was sort of the hope for humanity becomes the one that's more sort of rigid and set in her ways. It's an interesting shift in that. So, speaking of, you mentioned Tretta and the frame element. So, the story starts, we are in Tretta's point of view. It's like a third-person point of view, but pretty close to her head.

And then, of course, we have the past or the flashback chapters with Sal telling her story. And that's very much in Sal's voice, very much in her first-person point of view. Did you know, from the get-go that you were going to have the frame, that you were going to have it shaped in that way, in terms of the point of view; or did that kind of come up organically as you discovered the characters?

SS: I kind of knew that from the start, like, I didn't know the places that framing story would go, but you know, a lot of the strength of this story lies in what isn't being said. A lot of it was just me being lazy and figuring out a clever trick, because I wanted to make Sal the Cacophony, like a known quantity in this world. Like, she's not a hero just starting out. She's been around, she knows things and she's done things.

Those have made her reputation and her legend grow. I wanted that, but it's very-- No matter what everyone else thinks in that world, the reader still doesn't know who the hell she is. So, we needed a way to introduce her to them in a way that suggested, you know, this girl is bad news.

That was basically where it started from. I thought it'd be neat to have her sort of 'list of sins' read off. And so we know immediately what she's done and like, so we know that like, 'oh, you know, she's a big deal, she's a problem'. So, that began as a trick, but then it got out of hand, basically.

GP: [laughs] So, that's also really interesting because, you know, when we have a frame, like a story within a story; you've got both the arc of the internal story of Sal's story, but then there's also that outside arc. And, ideally as a writer, we're striving for the arcs to sort of not intersect so much, but like support each other; that we see a juror in either one and there's a reason for those journeys to happen in tandem.

So, can you talk a little bit about how as you built out and you know, the arc of the frame got out of control as you put it, how did you tie that-- Obviously, please don't give spoilers, but how did you tie that to the arc? Like, how do you keep track of the emotional trajectory of both of the storylines?

SS: This is an unpopular opinion, but if you ask, if you ever listen to writers, they will talk about the concept of balance a lot. You know, you need to balance heavy moments with light moments. You need to balance, you know, hard moments with soft moments; that sort of thing. More important than balance is the concept of escalation.

Balance just means you're letting the audience get too comfortable because subconsciously, they will realize what to expect. If you've been balancing everything out, then they will just sort of sit comfortably and wait for the next moment, and they sort of-- It sort of doesn't matter what you actually do because it's going to be; they already know in a way.

So, the concept that I work off of is escalation. Escalation is all about making conflict matter through consequences. There's a lot that Joss Whedon does and says and is, that I don't like, but he had

this theory that killing someone is like the lowest form of consequence. Like, it's the easiest, is just to kill someone.

The real consequences are the fights that people walk away from and the way that those fights change them, and you know, the humanity they gave up to get what they want or the goal they let go to keep their humanity. And with these two stories, the concept is the same. They have to escalate each other. Like, we start out needing who Sal is. That's a big check we've written for Sal, and now the next chapter has to cash it.

And in doing so, we show what parts of the legend are true, like-- I'm going to try not to spoil that much, but like, you know, in the first chapter, we learned that Sal the Cacophony is a killer; you know, a murderer, generally a bad dude. But in the first chapter of her story, we figure out that she has limits of what she'll do and she'll work around it. Like, you know, she phrases it a lot in terms of her own legend.

Like, she says like, "I won't have the Cacophony kill kids". So, you know, when some young punks try to get the better of her, she spares them, sort of; but how she chose to deal with that escalated the situation in the other story, because suddenly, Tretta thought she was dealing with this remorseless cold-hearted killer, but it's like, 'oh, there's actually something else here'. That deepens the emotional investment, and that's what--

That's kind of what's raising the stakes, and escalation is all about, because you want to-- You don't want your audience to just buy-in and then be cool with that. You want them to keep buying-in more and more and more. You want them to have a favorite character. You want them to have a favorite moment. You want them to have a favorite line, and you sort of need them to keep buying-in for that.

I mean, we all have our favorite character. Like the truly epic stories, the ones that stick with us; in movies, in games, in books; people don't just like love, you know, 100% of that. They tend to fixate on one part, you know, like General/Princess Leia from Star Wars is one of those because she escalates. She sort of demands more growth, more investment. And, you know, as her story changes; and as her investment deepens, our investment deepens with a lot of it.

And, you know, you have a lot of people who are like, probably don't know that much about like Jabba the Hutt or the Kessel Run, and probably aren't really interested, but they are like 100% into General Leia.

You know, they're not just fans. They are invested in that story, and they're going to remember that story for the rest of their lives. That's why there are stories we carry with us, and stories we just toss aside. It's why we still talk about Star Wars, and we don't talk about Avatar.

GP: Right.

SS: Or like, you know, to bring it full circle; it's why we still talk about Terminator 2, and why we don't talk about Avatar. Terminator 2 raised the stakes, escalated, gave us things that demanded more growth from us. Avatar was, and I'm talking about, you know, the Blue Cat People: Avatar; not Avatar: The Last Airbender. I will never, ever speak ill about the last air The Last Airbender; Avatar just gave us a fun trip.

GP: Yeah. With Avatar, what's really interesting too, is like, you know, this circles back to what you were saying right at the very beginning about how the world really has to be anchored by the

characters, and characters we care about. Avatar is very clearly; it very much felt like, you know, the movie producers and the people making it were all like, 'look how cool this world is', the whole time. Right? And, they're like pointing at it, and going--

SS: Exactly.

GP: -'this world is so freaking cool'. It totally makes sense that that world should be a theme park or part of a theme park at Disney World. And that like, it's very much, the world is what carries that film. Do the characters, do we really care about them? Eh, not really.

SS: Yeah. Like, no one can name anything about Jake Sully. I can barely remember his name. I only remember it because they kept saying it in weird ways.

[laughter]

SS: No one remembers anything about him because he didn't ask much of us, and that movie didn't ask much of-- That movie didn't ask us to buy in. That movie just said, "Here's a fun toy, but you can't play with it. Look at it. You know, see how cool it is and then go home."

Whereas, you know, Star Wars, it's daunting because Star Wars kind of like actively grabbed you by the back of the head and like pushed your head face-first into these characters and their problems. Star Wars trusted its audience. It trusted its audience to believe in these characters, to believe in their cause, and to sympathize with them.

And, you know, back then when they revealed that Darth Vader was Luke's father; that was huge because they believed in their character. They believed in their audience enough to say, "This world is exceptionally messy; and, you know, we trust you to draw your own conclusions."

GP: What's interesting too, is like, it's not that Darth Vader being the father was that much of a surprise; like, 'vader' is 'father' in German. If anyone who could, you know, connect the dots, would've put it together. And yet, the fact that it was such a surprise, shows how invested audiences were, because it would've been unthinkable that this character Darth Vader would be Luke Skywalker's dad.

Like, that's just shocking. I remember when I-- I've got a-- My son is seven, and when he was like maybe three or four, we were watching Empire Strikes Back with him. At one point, like we got to that famous scene, you know, "Luke, I am your father." And, you know, my husband pauses the film and he turns to our son, he goes, "Well, do you understand what's going on?"

And, he's like, "I don't know." And then, I turn to my son and I go, "Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's daddy. He's to Luke Skywalker what daddy is to you." And, like, the look on my son's face of like both horror and also just like fascination; it was like, his little brain was exploding. Like, that effect only happens because the audience is so invested in hating Darth Vader. And then having to realize that like, wait, there's more to him than that.

SS: Yeah. And then, you know, that was escalation because they continually asked you to buy in to hating Vader, and then they asked you to buy in to loving Vader, or you know, at the very least, understanding Vader.

GP: Yeah. Accepting, understanding, or being willing to give him the benefit of the doubt

SS: Or at least, you know, figuring out where he came from. It was asking a lot of the audience, but all the great stories believe in their audiences to provide an example that is not Star Wars.

He's not as well-known as Disney, but there was this great cartoon filmmaker named Don Bluth, who is responsible for things like The Secret of NIMH, and The Land Before Time, and All Dogs Go to Heaven. Those are kids' movies, but you wouldn't know it, but, well, you would know it, but there are scenes where you'd be like, 'huh? This is in a kids' movie?' Like, The Land Before Time is about dinosaurs; and it features a kid seeing his mom die.

GP: It's a very different mom death scene than Bambi. Like, if you put Bambi opposite Land Before Time, I don't cry at Bambi. I cry whenever I see Land Before Time.

SS: Well, yeah, because Land Before Time, you know, like-- You know, Bambi, it's sub. By design, it's sub because, you know, they didn't want to freak out kids; and you know, that that's a fine-- That's a fine choice, but, you know, Land Before Time; it's low, it's lingering. The main character gets to have last words with his mom; and it's terrifying, but Don Bluth always famously said, "Kids can handle anything so long as you put a happy ending on it."

And, he's right; kids are way smarter than we give them credit for, and they figure things out pretty quick. More than that, they aren't afraid to emotionally invest because emotions are something they have in a book, and they aren't afraid to just sort of be like, 'yes, I love this character'. And sometimes, like you say, "What do you love about them?" It's like, "Oh, he has a cool stick."

You know, sometimes that's it. But a lot of times like, 'well, why is the stick important?' And you know, sometimes they'll surprise you. They say like, 'oh, well, you know, he's like me. He's not as strong as everyone else. So, he has to have something that helps him out'. And, you are like, 'oh, okay'.

Watching kids' movies will help you more than anything, understand the emotional weight of storytelling decisions because everything in a kid movie is done to achieve maximum emotion, or it was, anyways. Nowadays, I find that, no shade of Pixar or anything, but everything's kind of like the same. Sometimes he's a fish. Sometimes he's a superhero, but it's always the same.

GP: And it's also, I think nowadays too, there's the element of a heightened awareness that the parents are going to watch the film with the kid. So like, I think a lot of that sarcasm comes in because it's not for the kids' benefit; it's for the parents' benefit. Like, the parent looks at Toy Story and goes, "Oh yeah, I remember that toy from when I was a kid." And like, it's, you know, like we're in on the joke, and the joke goes over the kid's head.

But because of that, it kind of, at times can undercut the emotion. I find that the places where Pixar does do-- Like, the scenes where that really hit home are the moments where you don't have that inside joke. Like the moment when the wagon in Inside Out, and what's his name, the elephant dude, like falls backwards. That's such a heart-wrenching moment, but it doesn't have like any sort of-- It's at the kids' level. It's not like trying to do anything for the adult. It's like all about the emotion.

SS: It sort of goes to the point that you don't need that sarcasm because the emotions you had as a kid, you still have; and they're still just as raw and tender because the way our society works, we don't confront them. We just sort of move them out of the way, so they never really get dealt with, which is why, like, things we didn't expect will still make us cry. Or it's why grown-ass adults; if you put three of them in a room with cardboard tubes, by the 10-minute mark, two of them will have picked up those cardboard tubes and start sword-fighting.

[laughter]

SS: We still have all those emotions, all that energy. We just kind of prefer to access it. You kind of just have to figure out how to access it differently with adults. Kids will just give you that emotional investment. Like, they are-- Once you show them that story, they're like, "Yeah, I'm into this." Adults, you kind of have to show them something cool; and then they're like, 'right, yeah'. You have to trick them.

GP: [laughs] Yeah. I wholeheartedly agree. I feel like we could go on, you know, geeking out over awesome movies and storytelling and all of that stuff for another like five hours. But I have to know like, what's next for Seven Blades in Black? This is the first in a series, right?

SS: Yes.

GP: So, no spoilers though.

SS: No spoilers. The next book, I think you're going to like; the next book features an extremely dainty-- Alright, I'm just going to talk about this because I'm very pleased with myself about it.

[laughter]

SS: In Seven Blades in Black, we meet, we learn about these guys called Siege-mages; and they have the power to sort of increase their own density and strength magically. So, a 90-year-old woman, if she had Siege-Magic could tear off the doors to a warehouse and flatten, you know, take out a wall with her head. You know, one of the things that we haven't talked about; in the world of Seven Blades in Black, all magic comes from this distant alien source called The Lady Merchant.

GP: I'm so glad you brought that up because I was going to ask about that. But I was worried that we were short on time. Can you give us a little, like a little nugget behind the scenes of like how the magic works?

SS: Yeah. Yeah. The magic works, and you know, it's actually-- It's understood in this story that The Lady Merchant, they don't know who she is, but she chooses a few people to be mages and then she grants them art, which is their word for magic. She's called The Lady Merchant because she asks a barter. And if you give it up, you will get your magic. But the more powerful the magic, the more esoteric the price is.

We meet early on in the book, a Grasp Mage who is someone that can move things with their mind; but at the cost of their memories, they slowly lose treasured objects. They lose relationships, they lose entire the experiences. You know, Siege-Mages lose the ability to feel; and not just like, you know, feel empathy, they lose fear, they lose joy, they lose everything until the end. They are basically walking sociopaths each one with the power of like 10 wrecking balls.

GP: That's slightly terrifying.

SS: Yeah. It is slightly terrifying. But in the sequel, we meet a Siege-Mage who is an incredibly powerful woman, but also has this streak of daintiness to her. She enjoys pink, she enjoys rosy, you know, she loves brunch and she can also like tear a man in half with two fingers. So, I'm super excited for that. But beyond just that, Seven Blades in Black also is going to have a series of companion Novellas with them.

One will be coming out not too long after Seven Blades in Black, and it's called The Gallows Black. It sort of goes into a little more detail about Sal and Liette, and the things they've done together. So, like, the Novellas are a fun way for me to tell stories that don't really fit in the main narrative. Gallows Black should be coming out a little after Seven Blades in Black.

GP: Awesome. And then, the next installment will be out in like a year or something like that?

SS: Yeah, probably in a year or so. Like, I'll be honest. I don't really keep track of dates. I just do what they tell me.

GP: [laughs] Love it. Well, it's been so much fun chatting with you today. I always like to end with the same question; what's your number one tip for writers?

SS: I'll address my number one tip based off the number one concern I hear, which is, how do I write? Less like, how do I create a story? More like, how do I actually put words on the page? Like, what should my word count be or whatever? All that matters is one question, is shit getting done or is shit not getting done?

That's literally all that matters. If you're putting down 100 words a day, great. If you're putting down two words a day, okay. Every inch forward is progress. So, don't beat yourself up too much for not proceeding at the rate you think you should be proceeding because that feeling never goes away.

GP: That is great advice. And, definitely something I will take to heart as well. Thank you so much for being on the show, Sam. It's been an absolute pleasure chatting with you.

SS: Thank you.

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