The Neuro Nest Podcast

Episode 1

Guest: Author Hayley Dunlop

Sarah Shotts

Welcome to The Neuro Nest. I am autistic author and artist Sarah Shotts and I've created this podcast space to connect with other neurodivergent people and talk about our creative processes together. So this is my first foray into something that I'm calling asynchronous podcasting. I've been trying to schedule podcasts for actual years at this point and it's so hard to find a good time that works both for me and the person that I am podcasting with. So I thought, why not take advantage of the magic of the internet? We're already connecting even though we're not physically in the same space. And so this is a way to connect even if we're not temporarily in the same time. So without any further ado, welcome to our first guest, Hayley Dunlop, author of *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas* and newly released *I am Dreaming of New York Christmas* I read this one last year this one has just arrived look how shiny the covers are so I would love to hear Hayley as we get started with this ... a little behind the scenes for anybody who is curious about how this is working I'm sending the questions ahead of time to Hayley and then Hayley will answer and then I will weave them together through the magic of technology. So you will see it as if it was happening in real time. But it's not. So Hayley, what I would love to hear from you is how long you've been writing and what inspired you to first start writing.

Hayley Dunlop

Hello, Sarah, I am really experimenting here i've got a microphone a lapel microphone for the first time and i'm trying to embrace technology but we'll see how it goes I love this format it's it feels really sort of relaxed and chilled out and I feel kind of nice low pressure so I think this is a really good experiment why and when did I start writing? i just always have found it easiest to express myself in the written written word I would say from the time I was a young child right up until now writing is kind of like my default method of communication. I'd say it's always just felt really natural to me to

write. It doesn't feel like something I ever have to force myself to do it feels very intuitive like breathing. So yeah it's just something that has always been sort of part of my identity so I'm very pleased that i've been able to turn it into a career of some kind.

Sarah

Next I'd like to know a little bit more about your novel writing process so how do you come from idea to finished novel like what first sparks your idea for for the two books that you've written or maybe more than that and how do you find that the story comes together over the subsequent drafts.

Hayley Dunlop

So I've written two books now as Sarah mentioned. At the start my debut came out last year it's called *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas* and my second novel has recently been published and it's called *I am Dreaming of New York Christmas* and the thing that I would say is that the process for writing these two books was very different for each one so the first book was very much a labor of slow love from November 2020 and then it became that physical form of a book in August 2025 so that's from start to finish that's a five-year process and the gem of the idea for that novel came from watching loads and loads of sort of Hallmark style cheesy Christmas movies during lockdowns and just finding them deeply comforting but also wondering what it would be like if an unconventional British woman was trying to experience one in her regular British suburb rather than like a picture perfect American small town and I just thought it was a really interesting idea and for the first time in my life I decided to kind of pursue that idea and turn it into kind of like a project that I actually stuck at. I think the circumstances of lockdown didn't necessarily like afford me time because I had two young children but it afforded me the need to write as a form of escape and that's exactly what this book did for me it was such a joy and comfort to write and if readers reports are anything to go by it's having the same effect on readers as well which is just the best possible feeling so book one's process was just all over the shop and I went through so many rounds of editing and eventually found an agent and a publisher and even more rounds of editing and it kind of like snowboard um excuse the pun because it's a holiday rom-com and then the

second book *I am Dreaming of New York Christmas* was a completely different beast because I had been contracted to write two books so the debut that I'd already written and then a follow-up um standalone but needed to be another holiday rom-com so in this instance I had to kind of like rack my brains and find a hook that I thought would make a compelling idea rather than just waiting for it to come to me naturally and the hook for the second book is that there is a neurodivergent British woman who's had the worst year of her life she's had a brutal breakup she's just moved from London to Bath in the southwest of England and she's looking forward to just the quietest, laziest, bed-rotting, imaginable Christmas on her sofa with her orange cat and she cannot wait to just, you know, shut away the world and recoup and recover and then start the year afresh. And then her mum and sister turn up out of the blue and take her to New York, which is frankly the last place she thinks she wants to be. But while she's there, she discovers fairy tales and magic and romance and learns a lot about herself and her family um so yeah the idea for that came was inspired by a trip I made to New York which is basically like my favorite city in the world, it's a close run with london but there's just something about new york that kind of speaks to myself and yeah we visited at Christmas time i actually saw Sarah's artwork um i can't remember what it's called but it's the t-shirt with all the tags on it which i just think is incredible and i saw it when it's being exhibited um in Manhattan which was really special and so the process for writing my second book was was very focused and very um driven by a deadline and I kind of enjoyed that process I think I do enjoy a deadline but I do also enjoy the freedom of kind of taking my time as well so it was nice to have two different experiences for writing those two books.

Sarah Shotts

So in your book so far I've noticed that setting plays a really important part in the story in the first book there's kind of a country city dichotomy going on and then in the second one New York is in the title. So I'd love to hear what about place and perhaps travel has inspired your writing.

Hayley Dunlop

What about travel or place has inspired my writing? And yeah, you're right. Both of my books are very, I would say the location of both of them kind of is almost an extra character in each story rather than just a location and I think the reason that I enjoy writing such rich locations is that they are very much based on real locations I actually find like imagining fake locations or imagining fake people really really hard and that's not to say that the characters I write are you know basically real people but obviously there are inspirations that come at me left right and center but the locations are very much inspired by places I've been to in real life so it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas the key location even though it's got a fictional name in the in the novel of Scarnbrook it's very much based on where I grew up which was a lovely suburb of Bristol in the southwest of England and it yeah it was a lovely place to go up I mean don't get me wrong there wasn't much going on there but I wanted to make a deliberate choice to set the novel somewhere kind of normal and unremarkable by British standards to show that it is possible to have an epic romance in the kind of most regular of places and then for *I'm Dreaming of a New York Christmas* as I previously mentioned I just love New York so much so being able to write a story that's set there just gave me the opportunity to re-immerse myself in the kind of restaurants I've been to and the streets I've walked along and just the kind of general aura and magic of the place which I love. So yeah for me basing setting stories and locations that I am really really familiar with and crucially that I love as well I hope that like my love for these places and settings comes through in my writing. Yeah, it's a really important part of my world building and my husband in particular says that he always likes the way that I write about places. So that's good feedback. And interestingly for the project I'm currently working on, which doesn't have a publishing home yet, But the location is a completely fictional one. And I am kind of deliberately giving myself that challenge of writing somewhere that I'm not at all familiar with to see if I can develop that skill. Because I definitely think that that's a muscle that needs work when it comes to my creative writing.

Sarah Shotts

And to wrap it up, you identify on your website as neurocomplex. So could you tell us a little bit more about your neuro complexity, what you feel

comfortable sharing and how that might impact your creative process and your writing?

Hayley Dunlop

Yes, I do identify as neuro complex. And I know that's kind of like a bit of a vague description. I mean, I have no like diagnoses or anything. I'm pretty sure that I'm not neurotypical. And that's as far as my kind of self-awareness goes. I think in recent years, especially since the COVID lockdowns, which as mentioned before, was when I actually started my sort of creative writing journey, even though I've always written as like a hobby, creative writing is something that has come to me later in life. I think I started to realise just how much my brain needed just tons of stuff going on at once, tons of stimulation. And it was a strange time, COVID, because in one sense, so much, there was so much stimulation at home with the children. They were very young at the time. I was still working and my husband was still working obviously there was just information being poured down upon us from governments and health agencies and news outlets and it was just overwhelming overstimulating but then on the flip side so much of the stimulation of life that I now have come to realise I was depending upon just got pulled out from under our feet like a rug and I quite quickly fell apart without all of these kind of crutches and creative writing helped me to understand my brain a lot more, understand my children's brains a lot more and understanding like the need to regulate myself which is just not something I'd ever thought about before. I had obviously grown up with like loads of helpful coping mechanisms and then when those coping mechanisms all fell away during lockdowns I felt like I was all at sea and needed something to ground me and yeah writing my books has definitely given me that um I think the way my brain works is quite there's a lot of swirling that goes around along goes around up there that's the way I describe it and it's it's hard to put into words but I think the person who coined the term neuro complexity also talks a lot about this concept of something called spiral time where it's the act of existing in a non-linear fashion when it comes to time and kind of understanding that in life there are going to be seasons and peaks and troughs and waves and swirls and yeah I definitely feel like I'm in like a productive period of my life at the moment but I kind of know myself well enough now to understand that that period isn't

gonna last forever um and i'll probably need to like hunker down at some point but yeah i think it's just about understanding ourselves a little better and knowing that there are just certain ways that we need to exist and like just a really good example for me in my creative practice is that I have to have an afternoon nap every day and it's like non-negotiable as far as as far as it can be like obviously if I'm out and about all day then you know I I push through but um yeah whenever I'm at home I will have a little kip after lunch um and it just completely recharges me and it has transformed my productivity and creative output and I think in previous years I probably would have like resisted that instinct or felt ashamed of it or you know felt like I was being lazy but you know now I'm older and I know myself better I realize it's just something that's hard wired into me and it always has been like my mum says that when I was a baby I just used to kind of you know, fall asleep in the middle of playing a game and just kind of, you know, lie down in the middle of the living room and have a nap. So yeah, it's something that I've learned about myself and I've learned to embrace rather than resist. And I think that's a lot of what understanding ourselves as neuro complex humans means.

Sarah Shotts

Thanks so much for coming on the podcast, and for trying out this new asynchronous format with me. Can you let us know where to find your work and how to connect with you online?

Hayley Dunlop

Thanks so much, Sarah. I've really enjoyed this asynchronous format. And if you haven't read Sarah's essay on asynchronous friendships, I really recommend you seek it out. Sarah, you should promote it again. It's really fascinating and it makes so much sense. um so yeah my name is Hayley Dunlop you can follow me on Instagram at Hayley J Dunlop although I might be taking a year off Instagram next year that's the plan anyway um I'm on Substack I've got a Substack newsletter called becoming an author so you're welcome to subscribe to that I send out a little dispatch every month or so and I also have a website hayleyjdunlop.com and yeah both of my are out now it's beginning to look a lot like christmas has also just come out on

audiobook which is available on audible and yeah *I'm Dreaming of a New York Christmas* is available everywhere i think um it had a little separate north america publication date this year which is very exciting um so yeah azvailable in all good bookstores and as ever i would always recommend and you support an independent bookstore if you can. Thank you so much. Bye-bye.