

Second Draft podcast episode 41

Podcast Transcript and Show Notes · English · 2026-10-25

Show notes

Episode title ideas

- Rewriting a Self-Published Novel with Sam Okafor
- Cutting 20,000 Words and Finding the Story
- From Self-Published to Traditional Publishing: Sam Okafor on The Salt Year

Episode description

Nora talks with author Sam Okafor about his four-year journey turning a self-published novel into a book acquired by a publisher. Sam discusses dealing with early feedback, cutting the first 20,000 words of his manuscript, and the editing rule that guided his revision process.

He also shares the importance of his Leeds writing group, studying Ursula K. Le Guin's *Steering the Craft*, working with an agent, and why writers need to finish a bad version before they can fix it.

Chapters

- **0:00 Introduction:** Host Nora introduces guest Sam Okafor and his journey revising a self-published novel.
- **0:20 Cutting the First Three Chapters:** Sam discusses early feedback on the 2019 release and cutting 20,000 words.
- **1:05 Feedback and Writing Groups:** Sam talks about his writing group in Leeds and reading Ursula K. Le Guin.
- **1:24 Finding a Publisher and Final Advice:** Sam shares how an agent discovered his work and offers advice for writers stuck on a draft.

Key takeaways

- Sam Okafor's original 2019 self-published book sold about 40 copies, mostly to family.
- A reviewer's comment prompted Sam to cut the first three chapters, removing approximately 20,000 words.
- Sam used a strict revision rule when editing with a red pen: keep only scenes where a character wanted something and did not get it.
- Sam received feedback from a six-person writing group that met every second Tuesday in a Leeds library.
- Ursula K. Le Guin's book *Steering the Craft* served as a key resource during his revisions.
- An agent found Sam through a short story competition and asked for another draft, which took eight months.
- Sam advises writers stuck on a draft to finish the bad version first because you cannot fix a book that does not exist yet.

Quotes

- [0:26] Speaker 2: "Honestly, almost nothing. It sold about 40 copies, mostly to my family, but one reviewer wrote that the first 50 pages were a different book from the rest, and that sentence stayed with me for a year."
- [1:00] Sam Okafor: "My rule was simple: no desire, no scene."
- [1:44] Sam Okafor: "Finish the bad version first. You can't fix a book that doesn't exist yet."

Mentioned in this episode

- Second Draft
 - Nora
 - Sam Okafor
 - Leeds
 - Ursula Le Guin
 - Steering the Craft
 - The Salt Year
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Full transcript

[0:00] Speaker 1: Welcome back to Second Draft, the podcast about writing and rewriting. I'm Nora, and today, my guest is Sam Okafor, who spent four years turning a self-published novel into a book that a real publisher bought. Sam, welcome.

[0:15] Speaker 2: Thanks, Nora. It's good to be here and slightly terrifying.

[0:20] Speaker 1: Let's start at the beginning. The first version of the book came out in 2019. What happened?

[0:26] Speaker 2: Honestly, almost nothing. It sold about 40 copies, mostly to my family, but one reviewer wrote that the first 50 pages were a different book from the rest, and that sentence stayed with me for a year.

[0:41] Speaker 1: Was she right?

[0:43] Speaker 2: Completely. The opening was a thriller, and the rest was a family story, so in the second draft, I cut the first three chapters entirely. That was about 20,000 words.

[0:54] Speaker 1: That's brutal. How did you decide what to keep?

[0:57] Speaker 2: I printed the whole thing and read it in one weekend with a red pen. I only kept scenes where somebody

[1:00] Sam Okafor: He wanted something and didn't get it. My rule was simple: no desire, no scene.

[1:05] Speaker 2: No desire, no scene. I like that. Let's talk about feedback. Who read your drafts?

[1:10] Sam Okafor: A writing group that met in a library in Leeds every second Tuesday. Six people. They were kind, but they were also honest, which is rarer. I also read Ursula Le Guin's book *Steering the Craft* three times during that period.

[1:24] Speaker 2: And then the publisher, how did that happen?

[1:27] Sam Okafor: Through an agent who found me in a short story competition. She said the novel was almost there, and asked for one more draft. That one took eight months.

[1:36] Speaker 2: So for listeners who are stuck on a draft right now, what is the one thing you would tell them?

[1:44] Sam Okafor: Finish the bad version first. You can't fix a book that doesn't exist yet.

[1:49] Speaker 2: Sam Okafor, thank you. His novel, *The Salt Year*, is out in March. That's it for this episode of *Second Draft*.