

Transcript

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You're listening to the My Simplified Life podcast and this is episode number 222.

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Welcome to the My Simplified Life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life, and start taking action today. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, and I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you while taking you on my own journey. This is my simplified life.

00:41

Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today, I have a wonderful guest who has become a good friend. We met online, as usual these days, right? And then we had the chance to meet in New York in January, and we've become friends even more in the DMs. I've gotten to read her new book that is out today. So I am so excited to introduce you to Dara Levan.

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She is the author of *It Could Be Worse*. And it could be worse, right? Depends on how you say it. And she is also the podcast host of *Every Soul Has a Story*. She's a speech therapist, an editor. There's like nothing that Dara hasn't done. And she is incredibly amazing. I really enjoyed her book and found myself throughout saying, oh my goodness, how did you know about my own life that you...

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wrote about it. It was fantastic. I was DMing her throughout the entire book reading process. And we're talking about not just the book, but how her life came to the point where she wanted to write, but didn't know that she was going to actually end up writing a novel. And we also discuss how being a speech therapist played a part in her book character. So it is a great conversation. I know you're going to enjoy it.

02:07

It Could Be Worse is out today. Hello, Dara. Hello, Michelle. I'm so excited to talk to you after having met you just over a month ago in person. We've been in the DMs and emails much more than that. And it always sounds kind of creepy and freaky when you're like, yeah, I was in your DMs. A little bit. Then we met in person, you know, but. So can you take a moment to introduce yourself to everyone, please?

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Sure. Thank you for having me on your podcast. I'm really honored to be a guest today. My name is Dara LaVanne. I am a Miami native, a rare breed, and I was a speech therapist, but writing has always been my passion and purpose. So I leaned into that a few years ago. My debut novel is being published on March 12th. It's called, It Could Be Worse. I'm so excited. I'm also a podcaster like you. My podcast is called Every Soul Has a Story and-

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I started that back in 2020 when a lot of people were feeling disconnected and isolated. And that is since burgeoned into also a sub stack and just all kinds of verbal and written connection. I love that. I love that you, it was a time where we needed to hear stories. And I think that we've always needed to hear stories, but even more so when everyone felt alone. And I feel like that is the power of the podcast is.

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to hear stories that we know we're not alone, even when we feel we're totally alone, but then you have these people in your ear and you get to hear what they went through and how they overcame whatever it is. And now there's hope for the rest of us. So I absolutely love that. Thank you. And today is your pub day. So congratulations. We're recording this early, everybody knows that, but today is your pub day. So yay, congratulations. Thank you so much. It's exciting and surreal.

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It's and I love the book. I went through it very easily and I felt like I told you this like oh How did you know about my childhood?

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There were so many parts throughout the book, I kept stopping to send you messages of, oh my gosh, yes, you just wrote about me. Oh, do you know my mom? Well, sadly or gratefully or both, I'm hearing that from a lot of early readers and reviewers. They're really relating to some of the characters. And to me, I was a arts reporter also. So I've been writing off and on and editing my whole life.

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And someone said to me, I can't believe you wrote a novel. I thought you'd write like non-fiction or, you know, some research-based thing. And I said, I can't believe I did either. It just came out of me. And it happened, I was driving my daughter to school. I think it was, I want to say it was like 2017. And it just literally fell out of my mouth. And I heard myself say, I really have to write my novel. And my daughter said, what? And I said, what? And I literally pulled over because I couldn't believe that word came out of.

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this mouth. And that's what happened. And I realized that, first of all, there are so many nonfiction books on the topics in my novel. I also realized that there's such power in fiction. For me, when I was a little girl, I got so lost in stories and inspired and same thing like you said earlier, like podcasting, even fictional characters, in my opinion, sometimes even more so.

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you really can relate because let's say it's a negative quote unquote portrayal of a human being. We all have our shadow side. I don't care who you are. We are multifaceted beings. We all have our weaknesses and our strengths. And in fiction, there's something safe maybe for a reader to say, oh, I really relate to that person. Whereas when it's a real person, I don't know, it's kind of like theater, right? When you're

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really engrossed in a performance and there's an actor portraying a certain character and I hope you leave, or people leave feeling inspired, but also thinking. And I'm hoping my book does that for people where they feel empowered and they feel really understood and seen. I also hope

they also close the page and say, whoa, let me think about this because that's kind of the space I live in with all of my work and in my personal life. It's just kind of...

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in the shades of gray and not 50. Just being fair. Which is important. No, no. That kind of book. It's not, although there's a little spice in it, which is always fun. I don't know how that happened. That's another thing, Michelle. I had to teach myself the craft of story. I was an English major in journalism. So like I said, this has been my passion my whole life, but I never thought I'd write fiction. So I was obsessively researching, reading craft books, jumping online, talking to fellow authors.

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And those spicy scenes, truth be told, I finally understood when my author friends in fiction say, I don't know, I had just this character. I said, yeah, yeah, yeah, you sound like a psychopath. What do you mean, you're hearing voices? Michelle, it happened. I wrote those scenes. I looked at them a week later and I thought, who wrote that? That was my entire book and yet I had no spice in how to get on podcasts. So.

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I love it because it's a question that I had. I asked Jessica Saunders when she was on, she was the first person I ever asked this question to. I'm like, so let's talk about your spice scenes. Where were you when you wrote these and what did your husband think about it? And I've read client books, I've read for fun books. There's a mom at school who's written a book and I like to call them spice scenes. I don't know why I think that it makes it more fun. There's a craft to it because I've read somewhere, I'm like,

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Ugh, your poor partner. Like if this is what you write about, then, oh man, it is not fun for your partner, okay? And then you read other ones, you're like, wow, you guys have got it going on.

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It's just the truth. So you have a gift. Yeah, I wasn't like, Oh, that's cringe worthy. I really, really appreciate that feedback. Because honestly, I had no idea what I was doing. It just felt right for my character. I really wanted Allegra, my protagonist, I really wanted her to be seen in all lights. You know, she's a therapist, we see her in her office. She's phenomenal as a therapist. She's a mother, she's a wife. And she's a daughter. And that's obviously where I think you

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And, you know, I did, I feel strongly too, cause I have a lot of friends who are romance writers and rom-com, which I love to read. And I learned that you don't want to just throw in like a spicy scene for the sake of it. That's gratuitous. And I think that's almost like demeaning the reader. And I like to assume my reader is intelligent. I feel that if you spell too much out, it's like you're dumbing down your work. If you leave, if you're too vague, then you're not putting the reader in the scene or in the moment or in the emotion. So,

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truly those scenes just kind of happened because it felt right that Allegra Benito, her husband, who's Jewish Cuban, which is kind of cool, that's called Jubin, that's a thing in Miami. And like I tell everyone, I didn't have to do research because two of my very serious boyfriends were Jubin. So anyone that lives out in South Florida knows, and I wanted to represent that because it's a very unique group. It's really neat. It's just a beautifully warm culture, the Cuban community in general. And I like the Jewish component as well because there are threads throughout my novel

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you know, multi-generational things. I don't want to give too much away. Yeah, we don't want to give it away because you all have to go and buy it and read it. And yeah, I related to it. I related as a mother. I related, you know, I've had miscarriage. I've had reflux babies, you know, those in the beginning I was like, oh my gosh, yes. And then you go down the path of like her childhood and what's being said to her. And it's just heartbreaking. And I think for any reader who's able to relate in any way,

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whether their childhood or even in adulthood, to have this happen, you understand. And I think the barriers that were drawn in the book, well, I won't give it away, but I totally related to it

because I had to draw my own. So I felt very much like this is real. Like as much as it's fiction, it had a very realistic angle to it that, yes, this could happen in real life.

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because many of us have lived it. So- I'm hearing that more and more. And it's, I hope it was helpful for you at some level to know that, okay, this can't just happen just to me. It's happening to this fictional character. That's what I think so powerful about story. I really feel we can get so lost in a world. And to me, my favorite books personally, I love fiction, obviously. I read all genres, except I'm not a huge fan of sci-fi, to be honest. It just doesn't speak to me. I love character-driven fiction. That's what I tend to gravitate towards.

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And the ones that I seem to love the most truly are the characters that feel really real. Like not just the character, it's not almost the plot for me. It's not the situation, it's more the emotion behind it and the engagement, the interaction. Again, it could be something super traumatic or romantic. Those are what draw me in the most. And I hope that my book had those elements because regardless of which character too, by the way, there's several.

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You know, one part also that's really important to me as an author, but also from personal experience is summer camp. So I went to Interlochen in Michigan. It's a performing arts camp for eight summers and it made an impact on my soul and spirit. I mean, that's all I talk about. In fact, I almost met my husband because of it. I don't think there's a day or week that goes by that Interlochen doesn't arise. So those flashbacks to a music camp in Michigan called Camp Intermezzo.

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where Allegra meets her best friend Ruby. And we see them in motherhood too. Their relationship is very important. And anyone that went to sleepaway camp, day camp, any kind of camp, I hope that they relate because there's such important bonding and self-discovery that happens when you're away from home and safety. Along with having a childhood relationship that lasts into adulthood.

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And it's funny because I talk about this in my book of different types of friendships and how they relate to, you know, your topics and your stories. And I have a childhood friend that I mentioned in the book because our moms were literally pregnant together. They were in church together, like front and back. And then we went to kindergarten together. She moved away in fourth grade, but we're still in touch today. We're in our 40s. And we can literally pick up from wherever. And yeah, it's amazing to have that kind of a friendship.

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that, you know, I hope everybody has somebody that they can just call from their past that it's like no big deal. It could be a year that we don't talk, but when we do, it's no big deal. And I feel like that was for Allegra, that was Ruby, that they had grown up together and Ruby would drop anything she was doing to pick up the phone, you know, what do you need and here's how we're going to solve whatever problem it is. And they're so different, which I hope you saw too, how

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there's something beautiful about someone knowing you at different phases of your life. They met when they were in the 1980s and there's something, you go through so much in your lifetime as a human being, or I hope you do, and I hope that people continue to evolve. And for them to be not only as close, but I loved writing Ruby also because she would call Allegra out and Allegra took it. They have this honesty that I think is so important in relationship, same with her brother.

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where they could really be authentic and be who they are. And that's something also that was important to me to explore in this book is that things are not always what they seem. Right. I think we need a sequel with her brother. I'm so glad to hear that, cause I love him. Nobody has really related to him yet and it's shocking. He's one of my favorite characters. Like I would literally laugh out loud at the things he was telling me to say. You know? I mean, he's so honest and fine and true to himself. You know, there's a lot.

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In my podcast, too, just a theme is something I write a lot about and speak a lot about. And also, as a thread to this book or two things is resilience and how I really believe that radiance emerges from our breaking points. That's something on my website. It's something I, in my next novel, you'll see that too, that basically life happens. Things happen. Situations happen. But I don't believe things have to break us. I always think about a glow stick.

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and you have to break it first before it starts to glow. I love that, yeah. And I think about that all the time. I've thought about that in personal things in my life, with friends and family, and that's kind of Allegra's journey. And I think that's how life is. I think nobody in life is all good or all bad. Yeah, I totally agree. And if they are quote unquote bad, there's reasons and whatnot behind it, but I think that they're really like...

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think of bad people, you know, they're not all bad. There's a good part to them. You just have to find that good part. I think so. And there's also times where if someone's not willing to do the work or they're not able to, some people are really not well, whether it's mental illness or it's their own blinders. I believe strongly to one of the many messages in this book that I hope readers feel or sense is not...

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every relationship can be the way you want it to be. And that's also okay. You know, it's kind of like, there's something when I was in grad school, I'll never forget, it was called, and it's not exactly called this, but it's something about the perfect child. So when you're pregnant, you have this vision of wouldn't I be a perfect child, verbal, developmentally, typical, everything. And so when I would work with patients that's child with autism or Asperger's, or cerebral palsy or Down syndrome,

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there's literally a grieving that happens of the quote unquote perfect child. So this child comes out of you, it's not what you expected. I mean, look, none of the kids that come out of us are anything we expect. And I love that, because I believe children are here to teach us. I mean, my two children are my best teachers. I tell them all the time. So similarly, you know, Allegra, if

there's a grief that kind of happens, it's not really spoken out loud or direct, but it's not just her situation. I feel that as all humans,

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Sometimes we have to agree what we thought we knew or what we wanted or expected and life doesn't always work out that way. And how do you move on? How do you continue to be resilient and live with joy in spite and despite of whatever's thrown at you? Yeah, let's talk more about speech pathology and how that was your career and it plays a part in the book too. Yes, thank you.

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Yeah, because it's funny because I didn't know that part of you when I read the book. And throughout reading the book and Allegra, the way she's talking to her dad, you put it in there. And as the reader, I was like, is she not able to say it? Or is she stuttering? Is she unsure of herself? And then when we talked and you went, oh, I'm a speech therapist. Oh, yes. Okay. Now it all makes sense. Yes. She was stuttering as she was calling out her dad.

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Talk to me about how you got into that career, how you've brought that into your writing, all of that stuff. Oh, that question so excites me, Michelle. Thank you for asking it. It does, it's an interesting answer. So when I was a little girl, I used to interview my dolls. I used to pretend I was Barbara Walters. I'm not kidding, minus the R, people just have always shared their stories with me, literally, like even inappropriately. So I'd be a kid and my parents would have a party and some adult would just start talking. Or I...

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I'll never forget this is a very tangible, not too long ago. Well, gosh, I think it's a little long ago. My kids are getting older. I was at the deli and my son was little and I came home two hours later. I lost track of the time. I come in, my husband says, where have you been? I said, at Publix or, you know, our food market. Do you know what time it is? I said, no. So this little old man was telling me he lost his wife. And like I had a next door neighbor who's.

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Wife had a stroke and I used to go visit him every week just so I could listen to him. He was in the Navy. I miss him actually, he passed away a few years ago. And he would repeat the same stories over and over, but I believe people really deserve to be heard and seen. And it is so important. So in answer to your question, my whole life's path was writing. I wrote since I was little, I had different columns. I had in high school, then in college, I started a 20 page arts weekly while I was a double major.

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And I was an arts critic, I was an editor. Then I've edited five books on speech and language disorders and pragmatic skills. How did that happen? My senior year of college, and this is a true story. Every time I tell it, people crack up. But I had spent the summer before at a medium-sized daily newspaper, super excited. I got page one, I covered the story. You know, an intern never gets that. I was over the moon. But I went home to the place I was renting. It was in Ohio.

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And I sat there like, wait a minute, I am not going to make a living off of other people's tragedies. This is not who I am. And I knew I wanted to be a features writer, which I did all summer. And most of my life was writing feel good pieces with depth and really what I do now, to be honest. So I really did a lot of soul searching. I had to be on that police beat because you had to serve your time. That sounds really bad. I was not in jail. I served your time, I mean.

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In the newspaper industry, you don't just get to work at the Chicago trip as I had envisioned as a little kid. So fast forward, I go to the dean of this massive school. I went to IU, Indiana University, and I said, I need to meet with you. Now, the journalism school, so I was in two schools. I knew everybody because I was running half the paper. But the other, the College of Arts and Sciences is huge. And I meet with this man who's never met me, doesn't know me, nor should he. I said, I'm having a midlife crisis. We have to have a conversation.

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And he starts cracking up just like you are. He said, you're 20 years old. I said, yes. And I told him what happened in the summer and all I've ever wanted to do was be an arts reporter and I'm not covering death and murder and destruction that is not what I wanna put in the world. I

said, I have one science credit left. Can I take Introduction to Speech and Language Pathology? And he said, that's not a science. And I said to him, well, I don't wanna take chemistry. I really don't like that kind of science.

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He said, nobody's ever asked me that before. And I said, well, then you can't say no. And he said, okay. I took it, I fell in love with it. I took another class, called my parents. I said, I'm coming home, I'm getting my master's. They said, what? So amazing how life works. I go to the university. I get myself a job doing their marketing and PR for the department to pay for some of my schooling. Word gets out that I'm an editor, I'm a writer. Next thing I know, I'm editing.

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you know, professor's work, a resume, just, it just started to happen. I wasn't looking to start an editing business. So I really never left it. And I loved being a speech therapist. I started my own practice. But what I realized after having my own children, I love children and I love the brain. I love anything neuro-related. I'm fascinated. I still am fascinated by the brain, but it wasn't fueling my passion and fire in my belly the way writing did. So...

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I had a friend who's been nudging me for years and she kept saying, you've got to go back to writing. And I said, Oh, come on. That was like in the past. She said, Dara, you know, so I was pretty much on a dare. Someone said in 2016, you should start blogging. I said, I don't blog. That's like so naked throwing your words into cyberspace. I like things in print that I could see and touch and feel. So this lovely young man said, read me something of yours. I did. He started to cry. He said, you have a gift.

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You have to put it into the world. I'm going to cry. Thank you. That was in 2017. He said, please, let's put your face out there, your name. I said, no way. Uh-uh-uh-uh. Because I'm really big on humility. Me being on social media is very new. I just, I'm private. And he said, let me at least challenge you. I want you to write a blog once a week for a year. So I did. It's now seven years. I end up trademarking the name. It's Every Soul Has a Story.

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which is a blog and a podcast and much more, and my book, and it's because of that conversation with this beautiful human, 15 years my junior. So I feel that me publishing my first novel is coming home. It's not like a new thing. And I think speech therapy was a detour, but it's so part of who I am that for sure in my next book as well, there will be representation because in my...

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opinion and experience. I don't see much of that in novels. You see a lot of nonfiction. I've got tons of nonfiction ideas in my head. But I have a children's book series that's been in my head for 15 years. I'll do that one day. But right now, what's really speaking to my soul and I like to be guided by my heart and what feels right is I want to see more, for me, representation. So my next book, I had it outlined a couple years ago. I have it all. And one of my characters definitely has a neurodevelopmental disorder.

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and not a main character, but a very important character. And it really will impact my main character, my protagonist. And I feel like I want to blend all of that in a unique fictional way, because I also believe story is about teaching. And at my core, I'm an educator, I'm a teacher. To me, writing, speech therapy, editing, all of these fields, the commonality is to me, educating and connecting people. And that's my passion.

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I love all of that. And it's very interesting because we don't talk about things like stuttering very much. And yet we have a president who has shared his story. And yet we still have grown adults who make fun of him. Even though he's been very open about his stutter, his story, his working towards this, how he embraces children that he meets who have stutters.

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This is something that truly is out there in our world and it's happening and yet we don't talk about it, even though the highest ranking official of our country has it. That's a really good point. And I'm glad you brought that up. There are also different types of stuttering. So there's stuttering more, what's called developmental childhood stuttering, usually develops in a child's in

preschool, maybe three, four, five years old. There's stuttering from a traumatic brain, it's called a TBI, like a traumatic brain injury.

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a car accident or a stroke, some kind of neurologic incident. And then there's also stuttering from trauma, which is less common. And so I also wanted to show through Allegra's character how we express ourselves can sometimes convey who we are, or even if we don't know. So our speech, our language, our intonation, our nonverbals can very often communicate a lot of what is not being said, or maybe what is not yet in our conscious awareness. So...

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I am so grateful you asked about the stuttering. I didn't want to say too much because I hope it doesn't give too much away. But I'm hearing from a lot of early readers and our viewers and bloggers, they're seeing that. It's interesting, but not everyone. It's fascinating as an author to kind of glean what's resonating for people. Right. So like the whole camp thread and sleepaway camp to me was so epic and important.

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nobody's even gone there yet. It's fascinating. And to me, that lifelong friendship and chosen family, I mean, oh, I was so excited about their relationship and watching them grow up. It's really, really, really interesting. And it's like any kind of art form, right? Like I have a lot of friends who are visual artists and you see a piece of art and I might look at it and say, oh, that is so dark. That gives me the heat of the week. Somebody else might look and say, oh, that's inspiring. That brings me such joy.

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And that's the challenge and the excitement about being an author is you can't, you can't predict how your words, your story, your character's journey will impact someone. Yeah, and you don't know how their childhood was. Like I never went to sleep away camp. We did in sixth grade because we all had to, but we never did these over the summer camps. We didn't even do camps, like day camps growing up. I came from a small town, but yet here in our current city, like

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That's all everybody does. They send everybody to day camp. So it's a different world. So the part where they're childhood friends and they grow up together and they're different and they stay together, that definitely resonated with me. Going away to camp though, for like months at a time, I never experienced that. And that's the other thing through story. I really hope that not just my novel, but so many of my fellow authors, I really hope that that opens minds. So I feel that through

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fiction, we can travel, we can experience things we might not get to ever experience, like sleep-wake camp, like maybe having, you know, a sibling who may be different than you learn about stuttering, you know, all the things that to me, again, you could certainly do a nonfiction, but there's such a, to me, a pull to my heart with fiction, because you're going, it's like you're going somewhere else. And I just, there's something so wonderful about that.

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It's that connection with the story and the characters. It's the part where you're crying at the end of the book and you've really actually felt it. And like you were there and you wanna keep picking it up and reading it and you're like, okay, what's next? And it's me saying to you, okay, we're gonna need something on the brother next. So if you can kind of continue that, I have some other thoughts on what else I, I've got questions on like the end, but we won't.

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I won't ask those now because that would totally spoil and everybody would be like, oh, so that's what's gonna happen. But yeah, I've got questions. I'm like, so yeah, I'll ask you when we're not recording anymore.

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But I absolutely love it. I think everybody should go purchase, it could be worse. And I love the title, it could be worse. I saw where it came in to play in the book, of course. But yeah, it's funny, because you do think like, oh, well, it could be worse. And you're like, well, could it? It's a really multi-layered statement, isn't it? Yeah, yeah. Depending on how you execute it.

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Yeah, well, it could be worse. I think the situation, I think who's saying it and in what context. You know. I love you. I'm so glad we've become friends. Thank you, Michelle. And it just means so much to me to be on your podcast. And as I told you earlier, this is so uncomfortable for me to be the one being interviewed, not because I'm shy, but I much prefer to be in your seat. So this is such an interesting.

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interesting experience to be two podcasters and I'm the one being interviewed. It's pretty wild. I hope you enjoyed it. I love that you have a wonderful ease about you and making someone feel comfortable and it's really beautiful. Thank you. You're really doing what you should be doing and I know you know that and you could feel it. Thank you. I love doing it so I appreciate that. Can you tell everyone where they can find you, where they can listen to your show and buy the book? Oh my gosh, thank you. Yes. So

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My website where you could find everything about me is daralevan.com. My name D-A-R-A-L-E-V-like and Victor A-N. And my Instagram is [daradotlavan](https://www.instagram.com/daradotlavan) and Facebook is [daralevanwriter](https://www.facebook.com/daralevanwriter). And you can listen to my podcasts anywhere, Spotify, iTunes, wherever you get your podcasts. Every soul has a story. And yes, I'd be so grateful if you would.

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Purchase my book. Out today. It could be worse, but it will actually be better. That's what I'm saying. It just got better after this conversation. Thank you so much, and congratulations. Thank you so much for this. It was really fun, and I appreciate this conversation. Friends, if you need another read, and I know you all do, go grab a copy of *It Could Be Worse* and go listen to some of the incredible stories.

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that Dara shares on her podcast, *Every Soul Has a Story*. Every single one of us has a story, and we need to share it because they're important. And to hear the stories of others lets us know that we're not alone on this journey of life. So I love that her show is about that and shares

such important stories of other people. I encourage you to read her book, to listen to her podcast, and to share your own story.

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and journey no matter where you are on it. Until next week, my friends.