



The Sartorial Geek Podcast

Length: 26:00

Opens with music playing in the background.

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Jordan: Hey! Welcome to the Sartorial Geek Podcast. I'm Jordan Ellis of Jordandené and I'm here with Dani Hedlund who is the Editor-in-Chief of *F(r)iction*, which is a literary journal.

Dani: Hey, thanks so much for having me, Jordan.

Jordan: Yeah! So, this is kind of perfect because we have our magazine, which is not a literary journal but we're getting into all types of nerdy fiction writing stuff, and so it was really cool to hear what you guys are doing. But for anyone who doesn't know, can you explain what the journal is and how you guys got started?

Dani: Yeah, of course. So, *F(r)iction* is a literary journal that specializes in works that push the boundaries of convention. For any of you who are familiar with literary journals, literary journals are traditionally pretty stodgy. They only publish things that are grounded in our reality, they very rarely take chances on new voices, they certainly don't do anything crazy like do expensive design and art because it's incredibly expensive and time consuming.

Jordan: Yeah.

Dani: And that's just kind of a pain because literary journals are the way in which new writers are traditionally discovered. It's how literary agents take a chance on them, and it's also how we, as great readers, kind of get to experience all these different worlds. So, we had been a publishing house at our nonprofit for years, the nonprofit is Brink Literacy Project that runs all of this, and we'd been a really traditional publisher because that's what everybody else did. Then, we started to get really cool, weird submissions and genre stuff and comics and editorial artwork. You know, the kind of thing you love so much you immediately call up your mum and you're like, "Oh my god mum, there were vampires and penguins, I can't even get past this."

Jordan laughs.

Dani: And we couldn't accept those stories because that's not what we were approved to do, that's not what I had pulled in funding for. So, we just kept ignoring these pieces we really loved, and it got to the point at the end of 2014 where we were just like, "Hey, this is stupid. Like, we're not publishing the stuff that we're talking about for a year after we receive it, we're publishing this other stuff that doesn't enchant us. So, fuck it. Let's create a literary journal that breaks all the conventions, that does everything we're told we can't do." So we started *F(r)iction* and we named it *F(r)iction* intentionally because we wanted to rub up against people, we wanted to change the way people thought about the industry. And Jordan, that was really hard. I lost about half of my board overnight.

Jordan: Yeah, seriously.

Dani: Yeah, but we loved it. We loved our jobs in a way we never had.

Jordan: I was going to say, for anyone who can't see it, I like the way it's called *F(r)iction* with the "r" like in parenthesis'. That's perfect, because it's, you know, fictional and also "friction" and that's just very nice. Nice work.

Dani: It's a good day.

Jordan: Yes.

Dani: Yeah, we started it and it was a difficult uphill battle that first year. We put out calls for genre work and people just thought we were lying.

Jordan: Yeah.

Dani: Like, they couldn't possibly be looking for sci-fi stories because that's not what literary journals do! But yeah, we started gaining some really great momentum and Jordan, as you can see from the issue in front of you, it's just jampacked with custom artwork. We have an art team on five different continents that illustrate every single story and poem and nonfiction piece.

Jordan: That's what I was going to ask. So the artists are staff, like you pair the artists with the pieces?

Dani: Yeah.

Jordan: That's so cool.

Dani: But once a story or a poem or a flash fiction comes in, we sit down with the art team and we say okay, what kind of story is this? Is it a grittier piece that we should sign out to that great tattoo artist we know down in Barcelona? Or is this something that needs a fine art feel from that guy we have in San Francisco? So

we have all these different kind of styles and we want to really enrich the reading experience so we're really particular about pairing them. I also work as the art director so I go through so many rounds of thumbnails and color coordination to make the whole thing feel really vibrant and unique.

Jordan: And it's beautiful. Like I don't actually even know if I've ever read a literary journal because that's not like the field I grew up in at all and they honestly look pretty boring and this doesn't look boring at all, so you nailed it. It's gorgeous.

Dani: Oh, thanks so much! It's obviously really expensive and time consuming to do this sort of color and we do cool spot effects on all of the covers. But that's one of the reasons that we grew so quickly. We're actually the fastest growing literary journal in the world and it's because we're really different.

Jordan: Wow.

Dani: So, people are constantly coming up to me and asking me like, "Hey, we've been publishing for like ten, fifteen, twenty years, we've never been able to get into Barnes & Noble. How did you do it?" And the simple answer is we just dared to be really different than everyone else. It really stands out on the shelf. And I think it's pretty clear we are so idiotically in love with that journal, that we just pour every piece of our heart and soul into it.

Jordan: So, is this a quarterly publication?

Dani: It actually is triannual, so it comes out three times a year.

Jordan: That is awesome and totally makes sense that it would you know...with how big and how well done this is, I can see how it would be really hard to do it really often, so it's really cool that you guys put all the work into doing it a couple times a year. I think that really shows...that's awesome.

Dani: Oh, thanks.

Jordan: So, how do you find the writers? Is it all submissions or do you have a base of people just from your previous work in the field? How do you put together your issues?

Dani: So, it's really multifaceted. Most established literary journals rarely take anything from the slush, and the slush is when unrepresented writers just send us work. So, we receive just like 15,000 submissions a year.

Jordan: Wow...

Dani: And that's just anybody sending short stories, or comics, or whatever, who don't have an agent to send work out for them, but they're in that early stage where they

want to get their work read. So, that's called the slush pile and most literary journals do not pull from the slush pile because it's a lot of work. But we have a policy that 30% of our work—

Jordan: Yeah, 15,000 is crazy.

Dani: We have people that just read for the journal. It's madness.

Jordan: Oh my gosh.

Dani: But yeah, it's a lot of work to pull from slush because a lot of times authors aren't ready or they need a little bit of edits, and a lot of journals won't do it. I actually poached a kid from *The Paris Review*, who I absolutely love, and when I told him that we read from the slush he thought I was hazing him. I was like, no we absolutely do that. So, 30% comes from slush, because it's really important for us to champion brand new voices.

Jordan: That's super cool.

Dani: We're able to do that because our parent organization, Brink, has a whole bunch of incubators that help new creatives. So we have cool programs like the Free Editing Program, and we have an entire staff of editors that will give you feedback on everything you send and that's really important because as a new creative, you're sending work out into the ether and you're just getting these blanket rejections that are like "Dear author," you know, "Thanks for sending this in but it doesn't fit our aesthetic." And you have no idea what that means, Jordan.

Jordan: Yeah.

Dani: That could mean you're ten percent away or it could mean it's just literally the worst thing that's ever been committed to paper.

Jordan: Right, right.

Dani: You don't know. So, we do a lot of feedback on that. But of course, the way to sell a literary journal is to put celebrities on the front. So, we have an entire outreach department that just reaches out to all these great authors that bring in Joyce Carol Oates, and Jeff VanderMeer, and Chris Moore, and all the big names where someone will walk into a Barnes & Noble and be like, "Oh yeah, I've never heard of this journal, but like this is a big name. I'll pick it up." And we also do a contest, which allows us to give a substantive amount of money to new creatives in response to the work, so that's mostly where it comes through. Though comics, we have a comic in every issue. We do something really stupid with that. Which is we literally help comic writers all the way through, so they pitch stories to us and then we help them go through scripting and paneling and artwork.

Jordan: Oh my gosh.

Dani: Comics is a weird industry, and it's almost impossible to break into because it's just expensive to print.

Jordan: Yeah.

Dani: So we really idiotically spend about \$20,000 a year just being like let's help three people this entire year get published. It's dumb but we love it.

Jordan: That's so cool though! I mean, I love everything you just said. I mean, you've been saying it from the beginning. This isn't done, but it should be. You should be able to find new writers next to super famous and well-known writers. If we want new talent to get anywhere without it just being random luck every time, I feel like we need organizations like yours to make it actually possible. But I totally hear what you're saying, that it is super, super hard. It would be easier to just go with prose the whole time and be like, we'll make this easy on ourselves by just doing, you know, the base thing that everyone else is doing. But it's super cool the amount of work you guys put in to making sure it's different. That's awesome.

Dani: Aw, thank you so much. It's really important to the ethos of the entire nonprofit behind *F(r)iction*. I started Brink when I was nineteen years old and it was after I had published my first book as a teenager. It was just a ridiculously difficult, stupid, heartbreaking, cry-myself-to-sleep sort of experience and by the time the book was actually out, I wasn't so taken with the accomplishment, but how close I came to giving up. And I thought of all those creatives out there that are much more talented than I am, who are saying much more important things, you know. They query their book a couple times, they get a couple rejections, they don't really know how to fix it and then these beautiful stories just get shoved into a shoebox and put under the bed and just die. That's heartbreaking. I want to make sure that voices that change the way that we think about the world and about ourselves are always championed, no matter how hard it is. So, *F(r)iction*'s just kind of a little piece of that larger idiotic ethos that drives everything we do.

Jordan: Wow, that's so cool. So what else does your parent company do besides obviously this journal that we talking about? What other projects do you work on?

Dani: So, Brink at its core is a literacy nonprofit and that isn't just giving people the ability to read. It's making sure that great stories are still there to inspire people. If you're not going to connect to great literature, there's no point in pushing literacy. So, there are projects we do where we nurture writers and we do things like *F(r)iction*, which allows us to make sure great stories are being brought into the world. But there's also all these other voices that never get a chance to be heard, so a huge part of what Brink does is going to underserved communities and lifting those voices up and using storytelling as a way to empower people. So, we work

in max security prisons where we use a very cool graphic novel memoir program to help women in maximum security distill a single turning point in their lives into a comic, and comics allow us to combat the really low literacy issues in prison. We're looking at 70% in the US prisons reading at the very lowest level, and 45% are functionally illiterate.

Jordan: Wow.

Dani: So, it's obviously a huge issue in our prison system. So we do a lot of projects like that. We work in homeless shelters, we work in dense urban areas, we work in very low income high schools, and everything we do aims to get people passionate about literature to increase their literacy rates and to foster a love for the kind of vision that goes into telling their own story.

Jordan: That's so cool. That's every single thing that I love!

They both laugh.

Jordan: So amazing! How big is your staff? Because that's...that's so much stuff.

Dani: Our staff is big. I just got the count, I think it's 56 now and I remember sitting down and—

Jordan: Wow. That's so amazing.

Dani: Since we're a small nonprofit, it's mostly volunteer run. So we have a core group of paid leadership that runs about 50 volunteers and those volunteers are doing everything from going directly into prisons, to working with our writing community to mentor them, to teaching in high schools, so we have all these passionate really amazing people on five different continents that are helping us bring this vision forward. And we primarily work in the US, the UK, and a wee bit in Southeast Asia. So we're kind of all over the place.

Jordan: That's so amazing. I love that so much. That's so cool! So is there like one place where people can find everything or is it sort of separate? Like, where do all those different projects live?

Dani: So you can find access to just about anything if you just want to learn about it at brinkl.it.org and that will kind of let you in to all the other publishing units and that sort of jazz. But you can also just come hang out with us at weird places. We do all the comic cons, we have a happy hour in Denver, if you're randomly there, where we drink a great deal of beer and usually argue about which Harry Potter house we live in.

Jordan: I want to go to that! That sounds perfect!

Dani: We tried to figure out which house we thought *F(r)iction* would be in and it was literally the largest fight my staff has ever had. I was like, okay guys.

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: I believe that. 100%. And you guys do cons and stuff too? That's awesome!

Dani: We do portfolio critiques for several comic cons so creatives will come in and we'll help them figure out what they need to actually get work in the industry, which I really love doing.

Jordan: Wow. That is so cool. If someone who's listening is like, this sounds incredible, what is the volunteer process? How does that work?

Dani: So, I'm not saying I want to grow up to be a cult leader, but...

Jordan: I mean...you know...

Dani: We have a really strong dedication to only hiring up through our internship program. That's because if I'm going to have someone in a paid capacity who is navigating the way that our entire company works, because I give my leadership a great deal of autonomy, I want to make sure that if they have an idea, if they have a vision, they can just go for it. So that means, that pretty much everyone I hire comes through the internship program. And we have three internship programs every year. I think five interns go into each one and then we hire the best out of that. It's a twelve-week program, teaches you everything you really need to know about content and line editing, how you would work in the publishing industry. The whole point of it was, as I'm sure we all know, there are so many people with degrees in arts and literature and they're just like, working at Chipotle because the industry is so difficult to navigate. We wanted to create a bridge between universities and actually working in the industry. So that's kind of where the internship evolved, but I just steal the best people for me.

Jordan: Yeah, very smart.

Dani: That's the most typical way to get involved. There's also programs where you can just read for *F(r)iction*. There's obviously an enormous amount of training and nonsense. We always have readers, we always have people that want to get involved in that capacity. So, if you want to get involved, I'd just recommend emailing us and telling us what you'd like and then we'll find something that works out.

Jordan: That's so cool. I just am obsessed with everything you just said. That's awesome. I really wish Liz was on the call too because she's our co-host who's getting married this week, which is why she is not here right now, she did all the literary stuff. She's a law librarian right now, so of the two of us this is up her alley. But I

actually went to school to be an elementary school teacher, that was like, my background.

Dani: Oh really?

Jordan: So all of the ways you're working with literacy is hitting me right in the feels. It's so great. I know you said that *F(r)iction* is in Barnes and Noble, are you guys in stores all over? Can people subscribe and get it mailed to them? How does that work?

Dani: We are in...I think it's twelve hundred stores in the US, the UK, and Canada so Barnes and Noble, all the Books-a-Million, all of that jazz. You can run by and pick a copy up. You can also subscribe. It's cheaper and then stuff comes in the mail which is always exciting. Either of those ways works really well. Some people are very fervently in the camp of one thing or the other but we're happy that anyone wants to buy our books in any capacity.

Jordan: Yeah, I like that a lot. However people want to do it. That's awesome. Do you guys have, not to make you pick a favorite, but do you have like a favorite story that's come through or like a favorite type of thing that you've seen since starting this. I never mean like, number one favorite, because that's sort of a mean question. But like, hey, favorite thing?

Dani: In terms of issues, the last issue we put out, *F(r)iction* #11, is island themed and that's pretty much the weirdest thing we've ever done.

Jordan: Oh cool.

Dani: Like, usually themes for literary journals are pretty nebulous. You can bunch a whole bunch of stuff under it. But we literally just found like twenty pieces of work that were about islands or like intense isolation.

Jordan laughs.

Dani: I had so much fun with that journal. The story that opens it is a heartbreaking story about a vampire losing the love of his life and somehow Jordan, it's also about penguins.

Jordan: Oh my gosh.

Dani: And it shouldn't work, and it made me tear up, and it made me just love everything about literature. So that whole journal felt like this really magical adventure and we found an original comic about the island of the dolls in Mexico and it's was just...there's some random cannibalism, I don't even get it, it's just so good.

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: Doesn't that feel great, when the weirdest things combine and you're like, "Okay, I have a whole journal about islands, and it's works! And there's vampires and there's penguins and whatever?"

Dani: Oh god, it was so good. And the cover art is just so badass, like it's just...ugh. I love it.

Jordan: Is that still available now? Can people still get that?

Dani: Yes. That one just came out about three weeks ago.

Jordan: Perfect.

Dani: So it's sold out in a couple Barnes and Nobles, but you can be sneaky about it.

Jordan: Alright, so guys, go pick that up, that sounds amazing.

Dani: When I think of a story that just really, like really, really made me know what we were doing with *F(r)iction* was the right thing, it's the story that's in the end of *F(r)iction* #1, which I would love for you guys to go out and get but it's sold out, so this just going to be a total dick move of me to even tell you about it.

Jordan: You know what, that's what happens though. It's okay.

Dani: So it is a submission called *Cretaceous Bro*, and it came in from an unpublished author, and one of my senior editors at the time was at a coffee shop with me when we were these reading submissions and I just look over and he's crying. Because he cannot stop laughing.

Jordan: Oh my gosh.

Dani: He's got this huge hipster beard, and through his tears he's just like, "Boss. I have got to read this out loud to you." And I'm like, "Can't I just read it myself?" and he's like, "No, no, no." And the narrative is from a frat boy, told in frat boy-ese, about this time where he buys some mushrooms from a hobo-shaming drug dealer, puts them on a pizza to get his girlfriend to quote-unquote, "Chill the fuck out," but apparently they are time-traveling mushrooms and they take him back to the cretaceous period.

Jordan: Oh, what?

Dani: To which, of course, he is then chased by dinosaurs and it is so funny.

Jordan: Oh my gosh.

Jordan laughs.

Dani: At the end of it Jordan, it is this beautiful tale of how millennial culture is told them they can achieve anything they want in the world, but those things are ripped away from them. So it's a terrifying, sad story, and it's so ridiculous and to this day I remember him finishing reading that to me and me literally holding my computer to my chest and being like, okay, what we're doing is right. Like what we're doing is one hundred percent right.

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: That is the most perfect, like defining moment of a huge thing that I have ever heard. I love that so much!

Dani: And it's so great. The opening's like, "Bro, bro, bro. You know like, when you thought it was the Jurassic period, but like it's not. Because like, dinosaurs aren't even in that. It's the cretaceous period and I know this because like, I've watched a lot of movies."

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: Oh, I wish I could read it! But you know, I get it. Was that like, three years ago when you first issue came out?

Dani: Yeah, we only printed, I want to say like, three hundred issues and it took me like a year to sell them because everyone thought we were insane.

Jordan: Listen, I understand that struggle, so I totally believe you. Are all the issues about the same size? Because this is like a hearty journal.

Dani: Yeah, they're all about 120 to 140 pages. We had 160 for issue #5 because I fell in love with this like, seventy-page comic, which was dumb, but I loved it so much.

Jordan: I mean, that's awesome though.

Dani: We try to keep them at 120. My publisher is constantly yelling at me about how heavy they are, because there's thousands of them, and we pay to ship them.

Jordan: Right?

Dani: But you know, if you love something and it fits with the theme, you gotta put it in there.

Jordan: Yeah, that's perfect. So, Issue #11 is out now and when does the next one come out?

Dani: #12 comes out on December 15th and it's also incredible. It's a taboo theme, so it's all of these really great stories that are pushing conventional boundaries, so of course there's obviously things about sex, because they're taboo. But there's also really cool things about pushing gender identity and the point of literature. There's cannibalism, because why wouldn't there be.

Jordan laughs.

Dani: What's the purpose of science, how far should we push that, oh it's just going to be beautiful.

Jordan: Wow. I'm so excited! That's so awesome. What's the best way for people to follow everything you guys are doing? Because that's all the best.

Dani: Well, Kaley, who is my marketing director, will absolutely kill me if I don't mention our social media channels, so I'm going to do that.

Jordan: Yes.

Dani: You can follow *F(r)iction* on Instagram, Twitter, and I think even Facebook. I think people still use Facebook.

Jordan: Yeah. Is it just @friction?

Dani: I should know this, because I run this company, but I literally do not know.

Jordan: That's alright. We'll link it in the show notes. We'll figure out what all the links are.

Dani: I swear to god I'm not a bad CEO.

Jordan: I mean, you have more important things to worry about. Like managing all fifty-six people on staff so I totally get it.

Dani: I love that you say I do that. I literally have the world's best COO who just does all of that. I've had people come up to me at parties and I'm like, "Hey, I'm so glad you came, like you know, what brought you here?" and the person will be like, "Dani, I work for you." Then I'm like, right, let me buy you a beer so I don't feel like a terrible person.

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: I understand that though. And then is there a way...what did you say the website is for the whole thing to people to check out?

Dani: Brinkl.it.org.

Jordan: Brinkl.it.org. Perfect. Thank you so much for chatting! I'm so excited! I'm going to subscribe right now so I can keep... well, actually, honestly I'll subscribe and send them to Liz because she's much better at reading everything than I am. But I am so excited. I'm such a sucker for beautiful things and I mean, and pictures and colors and so this is probably the only literary journal I'm ever going to read, but I love it.

Dani: So we have people will come up to us and they're like, "Oh I love *F(r)iction!*" I'm like, "Oh, which story did you love?" and they're like "Oh, we don't read it, it's just really pretty."

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: That would be me.

Dani: You can think of literature in a visual storytelling way, so I'm fine with that.

Jordan: Yes!

Jordan laughs.

Jordan: That is so awesome. Thank you so much for chatting with us and telling everyone about your company.

Dani: Thanks so much for having me, I really appreciate it.

Jordan: So please go check out *F(r)iction*. If there's a Barnes and Noble near you, you should run in and grab one and if you like this podcast and want to hear more of it you can subscribe. If you leave us a rating or review that helps us out a lot and you can also check out our Kickstarter, which is still going on and our Patreon, which is always going on if you want to support. Thanks everyone! Have a great week and we'll talk to you later! Stay nerdy. Bye!

Closes with music playing in the background.