Women Writers, Women['s] Books

The Long Game: How Asking for Help Landed Me a Book Deal

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By Linda K. Sienkiewicz

The real work of a writer doesn't end with typing *The End*. When it comes to publishing a novel, it also takes time, tenacity, and the humility to know when you need help.

The publication of my second novel, *Love and Other Incurable Ailments*, didn't happen overnight. It was the result of many seasons of doubt, problem-solving, revising, walking away, returning with fresh eyes, and, perhaps most crucially, asking others for help.

The Draft That Doubted Itself

After completing a rough draft, I wasn't sure if I even had a viable story. I turned to Jacquelyn Mitchard, #1 *NY Times* bestselling author and developmental editor, who I'd met at a writing conference years earlier. She gave me just what I needed: encouragement and sharp insight on how to shape the book.

Jacquelyn is a firm believer in planning your story. Even though E.L. Doctorow said, "Writing is like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way," Jackie counters that with, "You wouldn't drive cross country without a map or GPS, so screw that. Make a plan."

That became my marching order. I outlined (in my own way). I revised. I edited. And I edited again. When I felt confident enough, I started querying agents.

When Feedback Is a Gift

Agent rejections are typically form letters, that's *if* you get a response at all. Agents are much too busy to explain every no. But when a handful of agents took the time to share praise as well as specific criticism when they rejected my manuscript, I knew I had a problem.

They told me they loved the premise, the setting, and the writing itself, but just didn't relate to the main character, Serenity, an overanxious overthinker.

I felt stuck. I shared the early draft with a dear friend who is not a writer, just an avid reader with good instincts. She liked the story but warned me that the main character's tic's drove her crazy. Her comment served as a wake-up call.

So, I turned to someone to help me interpret that feedback and revise with purpose, fellow Michigander Lynne Golodner. Her editorial feedback, particularly on the narrator's voice, helped me unlock the emotional layers I hadn't quite tapped.

Then, to be certain I was handling certain emotional aspects with care, I hired a sensitivity reader. I didn't want to inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes or make light of something deeply personal for others. As writers, we can have blind spots even when we care deeply. Her thoughtful notes helped me ensure that Serenity's journey felt both authentic and respectful.

Armed with a stronger manuscript, I upped my strategy. While I continued to query agents, I also submitted directly to publishers.

When Doors Open

Almost immediately, I heard back. Three small presses and a hybrid publisher expressed interest. Then Regal House Publishing, a traditional publisher, requested the full manuscript.

I held my breath because, as you know, there is a process to everything!

After several weeks, Regal House's editor-in-chief contacted me with interest. We scheduled a Zoom meeting. I filled out their lengthy author questionnaire, wondering if this would amount to anything.

Finally, I received the email I'd been hoping for: "After discussion with the acquisitions team today, we all agreed that we would love to work with you to bring *Love and Other Incurable Ailments* into the world!"

I danced across the floor in my stocking feet.

Looking Ahead

The book's publication is slated for October 27, 2026.

At the heart of this story is Serenity, a thirty-year-old woman whose name belies her anxious, obsessive nature. Dumped by her fiancé, she fills her days with retail work, therapy, and caring for her male ragdoll cat, Margaret Thatcher. But her routine is upended when she finds a box of discarded love letters and becomes fixated on the man who wrote them. Serenity sets off to Ocracoke Island, NC to heal him, only to discover that real healing comes not from fairy tales, but from friendship, facing your fears, and embracing imperfect love.

It's a story about anxiety, resilience, community, and the curious ways we find our place in the world.

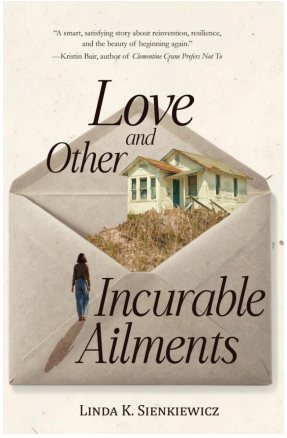
My Note to Fellow Writers

This novel wouldn't exist without the many helping hands along the way. Developmental editors, first draft readers, writing friends, sensitivity readers, agent feedback—and most importantly—even the rejections, shaped this book.

We often talk about the solitary nature of writing, but the truth is, books are built in community. Asking for help is a commitment to your story.

Linda K. Sienkiewicz is an author and poet who writes about identity, the detours we take, and finding yourself again. Her debut novel, In the Context of Love*, was a finalist for the Hoffer and Sarton Awards. She has a poetry chapbook award, four other chapbooks and a children's picture book. She holds an MFA from the University of Southern Maine. When not writing, Linda can be found walking her corgi, Cowboy, or volunteering at the Neighborhood House in Michigan.*

Love and Other Incurable Ailments



Serenity Tomczyk isn't dying—she just has anxiety, a WebMD habit, and a cat named Margaret Thatcher. After breaking off her engagement and losing both parents, she retreats into a predictable life of retail shifts, group therapy, and the safety of solitude.

Then a box of passionate letters appears in a dumpster behind her aunt's home décor shop, and Serenity becomes captivated by the mysterious man who wrote them. Soon, she's chasing a fantasy 900 miles from Michigan to Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, in search of the stranger she knows only as "Birdy."

Thrown from her carefully padded comfort zone, Serenity discovers unexpected friendships, uncomfortable truths, and the possibility of love. But when her imagined happy ending begins to unravel, she must decide if holding on—or letting go—is the bravest thing she can do.

With wit, heart, and irrepressible warmth, *Love and Other Incurable Ailments* is a story about connection, courage, and becoming yourself—just when you thought it was too late.

Preorder now Love and Other Incurable Ailments