“I want to have fun with it.”

Best-selling YA author Emily Duncan isn’t getting bogged down by the business side of book publishing.

By Lindsay Brennan, MA’21

Before the pandemic closed the Hudson Library & Historical Society this March, the teen room was popular with the junior high crowd. After school and on weekends, students flocked to the space to browse the stacks, take part in Dungeons and Dragons campaigns and play computer games with friends.

If any of them realized the youth services librarian at the desk 10 feet away—wearing exaggerated black glasses, dark lipstick and a nose ring—was the author of a best-selling young adult novel, they seldom let on.

In April 2019, librarian Emily A. Duncan, MLS’16, released Wicked Saints, her first young adult fantasy novel, to favorable buzz from reviewers and young readers eager for a story about dark magic, wartime, monsters and a girl (not unlike Joan of Arc) who talks directly to the gods.

The book, the first in a proposed three-book series, was a success by all standard measures—Duncan sold the 10th printing of her debut novel in June 2020, followed by a planned 2021 paperback release.

The idea for the first book came in 2013, when Duncan was a junior English major at Malone University. She had been playing the video game Skyrim and was struck by the game’s sprawling forests, ramshackle villages and menacing, walled cities. I could set a book in a place like this, she thought.

She attempted to write the book twice during her undergraduate studies, but after getting stuck in the same spot both times, she put the manuscript away.

Then, in 2015, Duncan enrolled in Kent State’s Master of Library and Information Science program and began working in the Kent Campus library at the reference desk. Between serving students and professors, she perused the OhioLINK and search/Ohio catalogs, ordering obscure books about Slavic folklore she thought might inspire her to solve the problem she was having with her book.

The research did the trick, helping her transform a setting that had been “amorphous and fluid” in her mind into a concrete place. Once the setting clicked,

the characters followed. She wrote the book in 2015, graduated in 2016 and secured her agent and book deal in 2017.

No one could have predicted Wicked Saints would become a best seller, Duncan says. She attributes the book’s success to its publisher, Wednesday Books, an imprint of Macmillan that focuses on YA and adult coming-of-age titles. The staff championed the book, designing and distributing bound manuscripts a year in advance in order to build national buzz.

For Duncan—who minored in illustration and mixed media art as an undercard—one of the most exciting parts of being an author is seeing the hundreds of pieces of fan art created in homage to her characters, which she features on her website. “I love art that builds off of other art. I love the collaborative aspect of it.”

Of all the books she has written, the book she is most proud of is Sugar, a poetry collection filled with characters from her books who speak in their own voices. “It’s so much fun to write. I can’t stop thinking about it. My characters get into arguments and plot and the book gets funnier with the stories.”

Advice for new writers

Remember that publishing is about money: “There’s a danger of romanticizing writing. I tell young writers, ‘You have to be pragmatic. Don’t get too emotionally invested in the business side of things or it’s going to chew you up. If publishers pay attention to another author instead of you, it’s because they think they can make more money with that book. That’s just how it is.’”

Remember why you write: “Try to write for reasons outside of having your book in a bookstore. Keep the spirit of why you’re writing, without getting bogged down in the ‘being published’ aspect of it, because otherwise it’s easy to get demoralized and give up. Before Wicked Saints, I’d worked on a book for 11 years, and when I queried it, I only received form rejections.”

Remember to have fun: “When I started writing Wicked Saints, I didn’t think I was ever going to get it published. I just wanted to write something fun, play with a lot of the tropes that were happening in YA books and do them differently. I think that’s part of why it worked so well—because I wasn’t worrying, ‘Is this going to be something that a gatekeeper will like?’ I thought, I don’t care. I want to have fun with it. At the end of the day, you have to have fun.”