

The Empyrean series writer of BookTok fame prepares for Hollywood

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Photograph by Kate Luster Work for The Washington Post

Four years before Rebecca Yarros published the book that would launch her into sky-high international success, she was making peace with the possibility that she would never really make it as a writer. Between 2014 and 2018, she'd published 10 contemporary romance novels that had garnered her a loyal following, but as she prepared to release "The Last Letter" — her 2019 novel about a man who leaves the military to help his late best friend's little sister raise her twins — her publisher warned her that if this book didn't land her on the bestseller list, nothing would. It didn't.

"I remember this moment of collapsing," Yarros, 43, recalls in a video call. "My knees gave out. I felt like I'd poured my entire heart and soul into this career and I wasn't going to go anywhere with it." She couldn't have guessed she'd soon become a household name.

A longtime reader of fantasy, Yarros decided to try branching out of romance for a bit into new territory — that of dragons, to be precise. Her publisher, Entangled, was happy with the pivot. The resulting book, “Fourth Wing” — the first in Yarros’s five-book Empyrean series — would launch its new fantasy imprint.

Empyrean’s instant success

Each book in the series has been an immediate success: “Onyx Storm,” the third book, published on Jan. 21 and is the fastest-selling adult novel in 20 years, according to Bookscan. Following dueling dragon riders at a military training school, the first installment, a 512-page epic, debuted on the New York Times bestseller list when it published in May 2023. With the sequel, “Iron Flame,” which published in November of the same year, the series has dominated #BookTok, a sales-driving corner of TikTok, bringing in over a billion views across its related hashtags. Amazon MGM Studios acquired the rights for a television adaptation with Yarros as the executive producer, six months before the first book even hit the shelves. The second Empyrean installment launch drew massive crowds; fans lined up around city blocks to watch Yarros speak on panels.

The experience was a surreal whirlwind, following two and a half years of writing for 12 to 15 hours a day. It was a grueling schedule that she says “nearly killed” her, one she’s long since abandoned. Throughout the buzz, the mother of six has survived by compartmentalizing her literary success from what she describes as her “real life,” or her family and home. But home has multiple meanings for Yarros. After writing “Iron Flame,” Yarros returned to a familiar, restorative base.

“Fantasy is probably my favorite genre, but as a writer, going back to romance is like coming home,” Yarros says. “It’s something deeply rooted, where I get to challenge myself and dig into story arcs and character development. It’s often where I process what I’m going through in my personal life.”



Author Rebecca Yarros in a conversation with moderator Laurie Hernandez about her book “Onyx Storm” at the Town Hall on Jan. 24 in New York. (CJ Rivera/Invision/AP)



Audience members hold copies of “Onyx Storm” at the event. (CJ Rivera Invision/AP)

These breaks are especially vital as Yarros grapples with an overwhelming degree of attention. (Even literary superstars struggle with insecurity.) “When you have such intense scrutiny on every line and every word and every phrase, and people are shooting at you from every direction about what [the book] should be or shouldn’t be, what you are or aren’t, ... it can shake my confidence in a way that I’ve never experienced before,” she confesses. “In romance, I get my feet back underneath me, remind myself, ‘Hey, you can write. You’re a writer!’ And I get to go back to Emphyrean with a better center of gravity.”

Even though Emphyrean is often categorized within the TikTok-ified descriptor “romantasy,” Yarros finds writing each genre to be distinct experiences. Indeed, she has “mixed feelings” about the term itself. “I love that there’s a way to bring more people into fantasy using romance as a guidepost,” she says. “But it also feels like a way of saying this book is written for girls and so it doesn’t get to just be fantasy. Love and sex in fantasy isn’t new. Look at Anne McCaffrey.”

Revisiting romance

In the break between the second and third Emphyrean novels, Yarros wrote “Variation,” a sizzling, interwoven story about a world-class ballerina who returns home only to be met by the child her late sister put up for adoption. That would be complicated enough, but the child is also her

estranged lover's niece. It was published in November 2024 and was chosen as a New York Times book of the week.

Yarros often pulls themes from her personal life: She and her husband adopted their youngest daughter after being foster parents. In 2019 they founded a nonprofit organization that provides clothing and school supplies to children in the foster system. Empyrean's Violet, like Yarros, has Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. Though it's never named within the books, the chronic pain and joint instability the character has is part of Yarros's experience of the connective tissue disorder. "I struggled for years to recognize and accept my limitations and accommodations, just like Violet," Yarros [told Health in 2023](#).

When I ask Yarros if she can pick a favorite aspect of "Onyx Storm," trying to choose seems almost to pain her, especially without giving too much away. "I came back with my confidence, so Violet is more steadfast," she said, also pointing out that Ridoc gets much more page time, much to her delight. When discussing the ending, Yarros emphasized how hard she had to fight for it, before settling into a broad smile. "It's my favorite book," she says. "I feel like I finally have my feet in its world."
