



Library podcast

Seattle Writes: Writing Teen Fiction

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[00:00:41] So thank you all for coming today on a Saturday morning on a beautiful day for our Seattle rights workshop on writing for teens all around the city this fall. And it's thanks to a generous grant from the Seattle Public Library Foundation.

[00:00:58] So I'm really pleased to welcome our three authors here today. I'll introduce them and we'll talk for a little while and we'll make sure we have some time at the end for everybody to ask some questions if they'd like to. So our first author here is Kevin Emmerson. He's the author of 12 novels and counting for children and teens. And his latest YA novel is *Exile: A Rock and Roll Road Trip Mystery*. A former science teacher, Kevin has taught for Seattle Arts and Lectures Writers in the schools program 826 Seattle, and Richard Hugo House. He lives in Ballard with his wife and two kids. We also have Karen Finneyfrock, who is a poet, novelist and writing teacher. Her two young adult novels are *Starbird Murphy and the World Outside* and *The Sweet Revenge of Celia Door*. She is a former writer in residence at Richard Hugo House in Seattle and teaches for Seattle Arts and Lectures writers in the school's program. In 2010, Karen traveled to Nepal as a cultural envoy through the U.S. Department of State to perform and teach poetry. And in 2011, she did a reading tour in Germany sponsored by the U.S. Embassy. And last but not least, Jen Longo holds a Masters of Fine Arts degree in acting and playwriting from Humboldt State University. Her debut novel, *Six Feet Over It*, was published by Random House in August and was selected by the American Booksellers Association as an Indie's Introduce New Voices title. In a starred review, Kirkus called *Six Feet Over It* "superb," and School Library Journal declared it "an impressive debut novel, simultaneously hilarious, clever and poignant." Jennifer lives with her husband and daughter on an island near Seattle, and if we're good, maybe she'll tell us which island. So we're going to start off by talking about what makes a young adult novel, a young adult novel.

[00:03:09] And Kevin, do you want to get us started with that?

[00:03:16] Sure. I'm still trying to figure out the answer to that question. Well, to me, the thing that really defines a young adult novel is that it's written for a teenage reader. Any type of novel can have a teenage character. But to me, what makes YA really interesting is trying to imagine your teen reader and how they're going to respond both to your story and to your characters. So it's trying to get inside their heads. And also, that relates to how you picture your character and how, you know, how you develop them, because you don't want to look down from them above as a wise adult. You know, "let's look at what teens do", you don't want to do that, because you are trying to get inside their head and get inside the moment when you're a teen. For the readers so that they, you know, meet in the middle.

[00:04:13] What else do we think about that?

[00:04:16] I'll add to that and say that, you know, it's interesting thinking about the writing process vs. marketing and publishing books and what the booksellers are doing. And so really, we know that YA is a, it's a way of shelving and marketing books.

[00:04:35] And recently I read there's a new memoir coming out next year by a Seattle writer named Jason Schmidt, who has written a memoir called *The List of Things That Didn't Kill Me*. That's wonderful.

[00:04:46] But what's interesting is, you know, he sent me an advanced reader copy and it doesn't have all the marketing hoo ha on the outside yet, and I read most of the book before I realized that it was YA. I really think that so much of the information we get about the packaging of a book affects the way we think about what's inside the book. Another example that comes to mind is M.T. Andersen's *Octavian Nothing* books.

[00:05:10] Has anybody read those in the room? Yeah. You know, the language, there's just really no way to distinguish his phenomenal use of language and say this book was not intended for an adult audience. So I think a lot of it comes down to marketing. And, of course, commonly the teenage protagonist.

[00:05:37] Jen?

[00:05:40] I can add a perspective of someone who, I am still brand new to the young adult, to marketing a book as young adult, and I didn't write this for young adults. I just wrote it as straight up literary fiction. The protagonist was thirteen, and my agent thought it would better serve a young adult population. So I had to age it up a couple of years, to make her fifteen. And then I had this interesting experience of having them tell me, this is young adult. You have to add this. You have to change this. You have to take this out, you have to put this in. I almost just didn't do it. I felt like my story's being, you know, shoved through a sieve of genre conventions. And I got all precious about it. And then I realized, some of the things I stood my ground on. I didn't want a romance. I refused to have it be the focus of the story, and then they almost bailed. Then my agent came to the rescue and said, can we try this? And now a lot of the trade reviews are saying it's refreshing that that's not the focus. But then

I had to be convinced that, yeah, this person's sixteen, there might be, you know, she's got hormones. I put in a misguided crush. And so there are things like that that at first I found frustrating, which I realize now, I have to remember what it was like to be a teenager. Do I want to read about a bunch of adults hanging around a graveyard?

[00:07:04] No. So it's still new and I'm learning when I read your books, and when I read Karen's books, I'm learning how to do that now.

[00:07:13] Jen, could you say just a little bit more about some of the other things they suggested that you take out or put in?

[00:07:20] I didn't have any teenagers. I had a girl. And I'm having trouble with my second book. I just sold another book. And they're like, OK, there's no teenagers. You can't have these people sitting around. And so I added a character reluctantly and that turned out to be everybody's favorite character that's read the book. They wanted more romance, and they wanted a lot of scenes at school. And I'd skirted my way around that. I'm such a brat. I just didn't, and you know, I said, well, can I have other people? Can I have the drama be in the graveyard? Do we have to be by the lockers? And then I started getting frustrated because when I was a young adult, the books I read, I didn't need all that. I think there are some kids who don't necessarily need all the boxes ticked, and the more I read young adult marketed things, I see that changing. Not every book, has all that stuff.

[00:08:20] Teenagers, they're not dumb, and they like a lot of different things. And I feel like it's opening up a little more, just the stuff that I've been reading lately.

[00:08:31] And Jen, I'm going to stick with you just because you're perfectly segwaying into our next question, which is comparing what it's like to write for young adults versus any other writing you might have done. You've talked some about the things that are in the scenes, the characters. And Karen, you brought up the topic of the language that you use. Is there anything else about the actual writing, the language that you use, that's different when writing for young adults versus writing for others?

[00:09:03] I was told I had to take all the F bombs out, which I think is total BS, because I read Eleanor and Park and on page one there's horrible things I would never say! I was told that maybe it's just my publisher, but they made me take all the F bombs out. They made me take a scene with a dead baby out, which I then put back in, I mean, it's about a graveyard! Diphtheria, babies die. And there was a lot of stuff that I thought, come on, like teenagers are on drugs, and getting knocked up. I mean, there's things that they deal with, so I was very surprised that I had to take so much cussing out that I had to take, I don't know.

[00:09:45] But again, I maybe it's the publisher and maybe it's the kind of story. Maybe it just didn't match.

[00:09:52] So, Karen, you've written other genres and for other audiences. What do you have to say about the difference? Different experience, writing for those different audiences, in different genres?

[00:10:04] I think in a lot of ways I'm still learning that myself and still figuring it out. I can tell you what I am working toward now.

[00:10:11] My current guiding philosophy is I'm working toward elegant sentences that many different readers could enjoy.

[00:10:22] And, you know, here I go in the first ten minutes mentioning J.K. Rowling. But I love her sentences.

[00:10:31] I think that one of the reasons that her fantastic *Harry Potter* series is so popular and only one of the reasons, because I love the series, is the way she constructs sentences. I think that they have an elegance and simplicity that is not writing down. It's just a particular type of writing.

[00:10:52] And coming from a poetry background, I want to make flowery, poetic sentences. I can't tell you how often I'm editing out similes from my work.

[00:11:02] You know, it's just that's the direction I want to go. And I'm trying for a different direction now.

[00:11:09] Kevin, any thoughts about different experiences writing differently?

[00:11:14] Yeah. I came to writing for teens from writing for younger readers. My first books were for middle grade, which is another nebulous marketing description. But really, I was writing books that I thought would be content appropriate for third, fourth grade and up. But then writing them at a sort of fourth, fifth grade reading level. I had a short career as an elementary school teacher, which was when I got excited to write for that age. So moving up to young adult, things change. I heard once that, I think, you know, as a kid, well I remember this: when you get in a middle school, it's like when you're a kid, most of your memories include your parents, and when you're in middle school, most of your memories just include your friends. And it's like your parents were just wiped from your memory. And my middle grade books are very much about kids and how they are growing apart and coming into their own within the fabric of their families. In young adult, my characters have already done that. They're kind of at this point where they have they have done the first step of coming of age and they're kind of out in this world. What I find really fun about writing YA, is that it feels like you get to be really experimental with voice, trying to capture the kind of frenetic, scatterbrained, and amazingness of a teen mind is really fun. And I think a lot of authors get to really, really play. I think about Laurie Halse Anderson, a famous YA author. I love her books. And just the other night I was reading the beginning of her new book, *The Impossible Knife of Memory*.

[00:12:49] And just like, her experimentation, it's almost like jazz with the way that she tries to capture teen thinking. The dialogue is really fast. All of it is like, swift, and just punchy. And I think that that resonates to me as a thing that, you know, makes sense with a teen voice. So I find it really freeing to try to explore that. I feel like I could do anything, voice wise, to try to capture that, oh, my God. Like,

I'm into boys. But I'm into music. But I've got my family. But I've got college. I got the future, oh, my God. I like Doctor Who, whatever it might be. It's really fun. And when I was transitioning from middle grade to YA, that was kind of the shift I had to make, was to kind of like, get into that more present tense kind of moment to moment thinking of teens, and kind of pull back a little bit of the sort of world building and larger perspective. Which weirdly, I felt like you could do with a younger, with a middle grade audience, like the J.K. Rowling books are middle grade books. And I feel like, I mean, granted, she's very good at it, but it's cool if you want to write a two page paragraph about, you know, a tower or something, and get all into it. I feel like that's like, not really something you want to do in YA. It's just like, all right. There's a tower. Let's do this.

[00:14:10] I notice that a lot. Coming from a playwriting background and writing for adults. I would read just pages and pages of introspective thoughts, and what do I think about this? And then my editor was constantly saying, "what is happening? Shit has to happen. You've got to have a plot." And I was like, oh, a plot. So that for me, with the writing, aside from the dialogue and the subject matter is stuff has to happen. And I've given these outlines and I'm like, "it's a story that.." And they're like, "what happens?" That was the hardest. And I think you're right, young adult seemed to like that. And I think as a kid, I did, too. Margaret's having her period now. She's upset. She's going to a party.

[00:14:47] Stuff has to happen, right?

[00:14:50] Yeah, I was I was actually just about to say something similar, which is I went to a lecture by Charles Baxter last week on plot.

[00:14:58] And it's a big discussion in adult literary fiction, is kind of, "where have all of our plots gone?" And even the idea that an adult literary fiction plot is a dirty word and that somehow it's you know, it's considered like a lesser aspect of the art form or perhaps maybe more of the craft of writing and less of the art of writing. But I actually have found that I also had a lot of issues with story structure in my first novel. So I started studying story structure, and it's become actually a great passion for me now, around writing. Looking at story structure and studying plot. And now I feel like I am uncovering the art and not just the craft of story structure. I'm not there yet, but I'm sort of really excited about the process of learning about it.

[00:15:46] Can you tell me about that?

[00:15:48] Can you make a spreadsheet for me and help me out with that later?

[00:15:53] So we've been talking some about the substance of writing and what goes into the book. Let's talk a little bit, too, about some of the logistical aspects. Are there any particular resources?

[00:16:08] or tools that you find particularly helpful for you with writing?

[00:16:15] Kevin, do you want to start? Yeah.

[00:16:19] Specifically for writing for middle grade and for YA. For me, it's always been all about being inspired by what Stephen King would call your "ideal reader." And for me, that's been actual specific teens. I never planned on writing a book for kids until I taught. And then I was hanging out with fifth graders and I was like, I want to write a book for you. There was this girl named Chloe, this fifth grader, back when I was teaching science for the very first time. I tried to write a novel which has never been published. But, you know, she was kind of the one I was writing for. And since then, I feel like my best ideas and voices are definitely influenced by kids I've been working with. So one of the reasons that I've stayed active in Writers in the Schools and at Richard Hugo House, besides the long gaps between checks in the publishing world, is to hang out with teens and to hear their voices. When I was working on *Exile*, I was also teaching this summer camp called Scribes with Karen at Richard Hugo House, with a bunch of high school kids. And every once in a while, someone would read *Exile* and be like,

[00:17:23] this teenager's too smart. She knows way too much about music and about art and stuff. And I'm like, no, no, no, no, no. I've met teens wastewater to this teen. Anyway, that's my biggest resource. I think you mentioned M.T. Anderson, before. I'm a big fan of his. When he was writing, I guess it was his second, is *Feed* his second YA book? Suzanne. I'm asking Suzanne. You should know. It doesn't matter! M.T. Anderson, when he wrote *Feed*, he would go and hang out at the mall. You do creepy things as a YA writer because you have to engage with the youth. But I'm an old person. He hung out at the mall and listened to kids talk. Because he wanted to create this, like, teen dialect in the future. And he has all this really weird slang in that book. Super fun. So I feel like I'm doing that same thing, sponging off the kids that I'm working with and just kind of hearing the beat that they use.

[00:18:25] Like Kevin, I get to hang out with teenagers all the time.

[00:18:28] That is a great resource. Another one of my great resources is Kevin, who has published twelve books. And is so nice to me when I email him begging for advice. So having a writing community, for any type of writing.

[00:18:44] That's it for me. I was involved in poetry, specifically poetry slam and spoken word for ten years before I even thought about writing fiction.

[00:18:53] And the deep joy and the thing that has kept me going always has been community writer friends are really big for me. A lot of my community now, I would say revolves around Richard Hugo House. The other resources are my own high school experience.

[00:19:14] I think the reason that I write YA is because I had a really dramatic senior year of high school where, you know, one of my best friends was lying to me about a lot of the details of her life. And I didn't know, and my boyfriend was gay, but he hadn't told anyone, including me. And my best friend was also gay, but hadn't told anyone.

[00:19:35]

[00:19:36] And, you know, my friend sort of started throwing these big parties. And, you know, we threw a party that was so big that it sort of destroyed this house and I mean, these deep, things that clearly, it would take anyone years and years to kind of unravel how all of that could have been going on in one year of my life.

[00:19:57] And being a teen, I didn't realize. I have not had one year as dramatic as my senior year of high school ever since. And I had all this other stuff to deal with just being a teenager.

[00:20:07] So I'm pretty sure that that is my primary wound. That makes me an artist, right? Is that one year? And I just keep returning to it and returning to it.

[00:20:17] So the project I'm working on right now is actually a highly fictionalized version of my senior year of high school called *The Year We Ruined the House*.

[00:20:26] And I'm really trying to dig in there and, you know, kind of take the memories but turn them into fiction.

[00:20:35] Jen? Before I answer this I will say that I once sat at Starbucks with Karen and she told me the details of this. And trust me, you cannot wait to read this book. And I need you to get off your ass and finish this for me, because I need to read that book. I will say again, as someone brand new to YA, I think as you were talking, I realized every book at first I got my back up. It was like, "I'm not slumming it in YA. What's going on? I didn't know anything about young adult. I know! This is the typical, this is a lot of crap you get from there are a lot of awards that if you write young adult and middle grade, you're not eligible for, like literary awards. It's like it's only, you know, adult straight up literary fiction. And I totally as a new writer bought into that and didn't realize, it's just total B.S. This is an amazing, you know, kind of writing and for all ages. As I started writing and I realized everything that I wrote, supposedly as literary fiction for adults, all my protagonists, all of them were teenagers.

[00:21:35] And I think I realized growing up in a graveyard and having stupid parents, a lot of crap that happened that was worth writing about, anything at all happened when I was a teenager. And it's such a tumultuous time and a great perspective. And I think so we're talking about tools and things. Again, what Karen was talking about, a writing community. I just moved from San Francisco last year and wrote this whole book by myself in solitary with my editor telling me to put teenagers in and stuff. And I didn't have any kind of community. Then I moved to Seattle and in one year, the writing community here is so welcoming. And I think particularly in the young adult and the middle grade, the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, which is everywhere. And it was in San Francisco. But in San Francisco, it was sort of like if you weren't Dave Eggers, nobody cared. And people were very, ... I had sold the book, but it wasn't out for like two years. And people were very, "oh, you know, you can't come to our table."

[00:22:30] Then I move here and people are like, oh, my God, let's come and write. You know, Martha Brockenbrough. I'm writing on Thursdays with her at a cupcake shop. These people who are, you know, I've written twelve books. Let's let's hook up anyway.

[00:22:41] And actual writers are so welcoming and there's nothing more useful, I think. It's so not solitary. I've realized that writing a book by yourself is just not possible, at least for me. And I've had people beta reading this totally crappy book I'm trying to write now. And they'll slog through these, you know, if you have people who are willing to read a book in the first stages and just give you what they think and it's hard to read a first draft. I mean, I pity the people, but they're doing that. And it's the most amazing welcoming community. And that is the biggest tool I think they have. And I'm all in for YA. It's amazing. It is the most challenging, it's the most new stuff. I think the most inventive things are coming out of it. There's some fine adult stuff, whatever. I don't know. But young adult, I am so proud and so relieved that I figured it out. And I'm proud to be in it. And I just I sold, I can't tweet about this yet, but I just got a two book deal from Random now, last week. And both are for young adult. I was like, yeah, I'm in. And first I thought, I did one young adult. I'm totally in.

[00:23:47] So Jen, you mentioned writing in a cupcake shop? And that would be a great thing to talk about - the process. Each writer has a different process. But I think it'd be interesting to hear how much time each of you spends actually in front of a laptop. How much time do you spend reading other books? How much time do you spend walking your dog around the block? And anything else you do that you would say as part of your process. I keep starting with you Kevin.

[00:24:23] Let's start with Karen.

[00:24:25] Yeah. So my best writing has happened during periods of going on retreats. I still write when I'm in Seattle having my regular life, but retreats have been the best for me. When I was at I've done a couple of retreats at Hedge Brook, which is a women's writing center on Whidbey Island.

[00:24:46] And what I discovered there, because I also write poetry. Which is a very different writing process for me. It had a lot more to do with inspiration and feelings, and the beach, and places like that.

[00:24:59] And so I realized when I went to Hedge Brook, best case scenario, I wake up in the morning,

[00:25:04] I don't do anything else except for make coffee before I start writing, and I write for four hours. After four hours, my brain turns to Jello and I eat something and go for a walk where the story continues to unfold as I'm walking. I think that physical movement is such a big part of the writing process.

[00:25:25] Come back, you know, kind of like have an afternoon doing something that's not writing. Have dinner, come back, drink wine and write poetry in the evening.

[00:25:36] That seems to be kind of the perfect way for those two things to function inside of me.

[00:25:43] And then when I'm in Seattle, I do have a writing studio that's outside of my home because I live in a studio apartment and it's kind of one room and it's too much.

[00:25:51] So what I've done is I've divided up, like when I'm at home, I'm allowed to do stuff like, fill out contracts and, email people about, you know, coming to panel discussions at the library.

[00:26:03] And then when I'm at the office space, it's sort of this sacred, like once I pass through the door, it's just supposed to be art. And I can go there and read and I can go there and, you know, daydream, but I can't sort of do any of the business sides of writing.

[00:26:17] And I think that's been really special to set aside a kind of a sacred space like that.

[00:26:23] My friend Trenton Paine who is a writer, who's a poet and a writer is here. And we were talking about it right before the event started about this. You know, where can you find a space where you feel like time sort of slips away? When I wrote the first novel, I was working full time. And the way that I was able to do that was every Saturday and Sunday morning, I went to a coffee shop for four hours and wrote. And I found a coffee shop outside of town. I drove 20 minutes to this coffee shop because very few people went there, and it had been a church. It was an old country church that had been changed into a coffee shop. And so there were these stained glass windows. And I would go in there and feel like I stepped back in time, kind of get away from everything. And I think that might be a special key to it for me is this idea of escaping time for a little while.

[00:27:15] I think, oh, Kevin, you have three kids.

[00:27:17] Two. Don't tell me there's a third.

[00:27:22] Well, Kevin, I'm here to tell you, your wife wanted to be to let you know. It's because, I think having it's, you know, adding jobs and kids to it makes it different. So I have one eleven year old, but that's a great age because they're in school for so long. So I have to, like you were talking about movement. I run every morning, a few miles. If I don't, I can't write. And then, get my kid off to school. And then I do all the crap until like ten or eleven, because I'm able to write from home. So I do the dishes, and pay the bills, and do the e-mails. And then from eleven to three, that's it. And that's about four hours - seems to be the magic time because after about four hours too, I can't handle it anymore. So from eleven to three, either at a café, or I have an office since we moved here and I just bought a nice chair that I can sit in. That's nice. But about four hours and you know, within that you're taking breaks to look up stuff, but that's about it. But then this weekly, this is another new thing with the writing community. Martha is like, "oh, let's have a writing date." I thought, "what the hell's a writing date?" You sit and write. So we go to this cafe and it just was like, oh, my.

[00:28:27] She opened up her laptop, put her headphones on and that was it. I thought, oh, okay, I guess we're writing. So we sit there and it's it's sort of like having an exercise person. Like they're not

gonna let you be lazy with your pilates. No one's gonna let me look at Facebook when I've got this person next to me who's actually a writer. And then at noon, we take a break and eat a cupcake and chat. And then we get back to writing.

[00:28:46] And when I write with Martha, when I write in a cafe, we'll go like, I'll stay longer and go like five hours. It's very weird and I'm OK. And then I'm late to pick up my kid. I've been late more than once. I'm sorry, baby. Where I get like, now I set an alarm. But I think it really is about, you've got the time and nothing can interrupt it, and you sit your butt in the chair and you sit there and if for me at least the screen is blank, the screen is blank. But I'm not moving. I have to do this or it won't get done.

[00:29:12] And it has to be the same time every day. It's a job.

[00:29:17] I am a little more inconsistent than that. I kind of tend to go, and it's kind of tidal for me. You know, I have weeks where I write ten or twenty thousand words and I've weeks where I write kind of like no words. Part of it is, I've I've gotten into this groove where I'm doing two books a year or so. I'm trying to write middle grade and young adult. I'm kind of working in that space. It's really fun. It's a little tiring, but it's what am I going to complain about it? It's like it's pretty great. But I get a little, I get a little dry for ideas sometimes. And then also, I mean, an awesome thing you can do in this space is go to teen events and you can go and visit schools. And I try to do a lot of that. I love talking. I was just down at Puyallup High School yesterday talking to teens, and it was like, I was actually really grumpy about going down there because I had to get my PowerPoint ready and then drive and then like, be there and that meant I wasn't gonna be writing and I'm like two months late on a book. But then it was like the best hour ever with these teens. We just were hanging out and we were chatting about, like, you know, how to kind of find yourself and put yourself out there.

[00:30:25] And it was really, really cool. So I tend to, so there's a lot of logistics that go into that travel stuff, and then there's life. I have two kids and, you know, usually take them to school in the morning. I remember when I started out at, like, the full time writing thing, I felt like really, really guilty that a whole day might go by and I would only write for, I would only actually be writing for like an hour or two. But then I realized that what I was doing with the rest of the day was kind of getting ready for those two hours to make themselves apparent to me. And they don't always happen at the same time. This summer they were happening from like six to eight in the morning, because there's the sun. When the sun would happen and I would happen and we would be there and I would be like, yes, we are writing. And I even was like, good enough to just like not check email before I wrote, which is really distracting. But then there have been whole books, I have this book coming out this winter that I wrote the whole thing at night, seven to ten at night at Cafe Lladro in Fremont, when my son was like a newborn, because I just couldn't be in the house, and mornings weren't working and it was like that was the only time of day.

[00:31:32] So it's been different. And I tend to like, have a big..., I tend to have a long, slow ramp up where I'm just complaining all the time to my wife. She's totally used to this. And then bam, like, I turn the corner and like, crank out the book, a draft of it for like a month or two and then dial back and then

hate that draft and then revise. And revising is something I feel like I can get on a schedule with. I can revise for six to eight hours a day, just sit there with notes and moving through. Yeah. First draft is black magic. It's weird. But I also know now that first drafts are never any good, so who cares. Just bang it out. And when I'm banging it out, actually that stuff's usually better than the times when I'm like, oh the muse. I'm writing poetry, this prose is not poetry, but this prose is brilliant. And then the next morning I'm like, what were you talking about? What is that? Anyway. So, yeah.

[00:32:26] Okay, let's talk about a little bit more about transitioning from writing to being published. Jen, you brought up a little bit about what it was, how that actually affected your writing. Can you say a few more things about how you got published?

[00:32:44] I definitely think that's something people really want to know about.

[00:32:51] I think, if you if you write a book with the idea that you want to be published it, in my experience, it seems like that is sort of putting the cart before the horse and is not going to make a really good book. Because really, if you want to be published or self-published, you can upload it to Amazon tomorrow.

[00:33:13] You shouldn't do that, though. That's not the first thing you should do. Please don't do that first, because then if somebody wants it, it's hard, anyway.

[00:33:20] So, yeah, I think a motivation for a book should be that you've got this story that you want to tell and you think that you're the best person to tell it. And if you always put the focus on the writing and always come back to the writing and making the story, then it probably eventually, unless you're writing like a prison manifesto from your cell, it probably, eventually, the odds are... So, it was hard because you had this thing that you think is this beautiful piece of work and then, you know, as the newest one, I only have one book out. And so I'm fresh off this experience, where you suddenly get these people saying, you know, when you start querying agents, you finish and you have your friends all tell you, and you correct it, you start sending it out. And agents will either not call you at all, or you'll get a, you know, send me the whole manuscript, and then they'll say things like, "oh, this is great, except I hate the voice." And you think, well, how am I supposed to change the voice? Or this is great, except the whole plot is stupid. You know, and then eventually, it took me a year and then finally someone wrote and said that, oh, God. Cheryl Klein is the North American editor for Harry Potter. So she's the one that that changes the word "Bonnett" to "Hood" or whatever.

[00:34:31] She loved my book. And it was like, I am going to do this. She had an exclusive for like three months and then wanted a spec revision. And you'll do spec revisions for agents who will say, "change the whole thing, and then maybe I'll take you on as a client." And she did that. And I thought, oh, my God, the Harry Potter editor is going to, J.K. Rowling and I are going to be best friends. And after six months, she sent one sentence email to my agent, she's the editor, to my agent saying it's not for me. And I thought, oh, my God. And it's so crushing to come back from that. And you jump through hoops. And I felt like that's what I guess the run up is that I felt like I was jumping through hoops, and I was changing this book. And I changed it and did like, five whole complete revisions for

people. And there's a point where you think this is ridiculous. I need to come back to the writing. And what is the story? And as soon as I did that and got rid of all the crap that I'd put in for all these different editors, we pitched it to Random and they bought it. And it it seemed that, but it is hard. You have to stick to it. It's a balance, I think, between knowing that these are editors, or these are agents and they know the business, they know the market, and they know what needs to be in a book.

[00:35:38] But then balancing that with, what is this story? Where do you dig your heels in, and stick to your guns? And again, I keep coming back to this, but the one gun I stuck to the whole time was I was not going to write a teen romance. And it took over a year to sell the book, but it did. Now, if there were people saying, you know, your grammar is terrible, what is going on with this plot? And I did have to fix the plot, but yeah. So it's I think to me it's a balance, and you sell it. It's art. Anytime art and commerce mix, it's rough. It is a rough thing. But in the end, I had done the artistic thing and I wrote the book. And now I had to admit, do I want to sell it or not? I could have perfectly been happy with it living in my drawer and no one ever seeing it. But then, I wasn't happy. I think this book can make people feel a little less lonely. I think people might love it. This could be somebody's *Bridge to Terabithia*, you know. And so you make concessions, but you pick and choose.

[00:36:28] And that's another thing. I realized I am a young adult writer. My favorite book. I'm 42 years old. My favorite book is still *The Bridge to Terabithia* and *Tiger Eyes*, which I shouldn't say that because you read this and go, if I was just a *Tiger Eyes* rip off, and it's true. Those are the books when you're young and a middle grade and a picture book reader. Those are the books that are the books that define who you are as a reader for the rest of your life. Those are the books that stay with you the longest just by math. The book you read in your 40s may be great, but it didn't define you as a reader, because you're 40.

[00:36:57] And so it is, it's a balancing act. Kevin, tell us about your.

[00:37:04] What was the question? How do you get published? I just wrote until I wrote something good. And then I got it published. That's really the short answer. The longer answer is that I realized I wanted to write for kids. So, I realized this early on, early enough on that I had a lot of time, which was fortunate for me, because I had to make a lot of mistakes. I wrote a manuscript. I sent it out to this, I was about twenty-five when I wrote my first manuscript and I sent it out. On my very first round of letters to agents and editors, I got a hit on this manuscript, which I've still never sold. An editor at one of the big publishing houses wanted to read it. And at that time, I just kind of like, oh, sweet. We'll get it published, buy a yacht. It was great. You know, just totally clueless about what was going to happen, you know? And she wrote back and was like, this is cool, but it's a mess. It's not for me. You know. And I was like, I actually wrote to her and was like, what if I revised it based on your comments? And she was like, yeah, that'd be cool. And then I, like, revised it and I sent it back and she was like, no. I sent that book around. And then meanwhile, I wrote a second book and I sent that book around and that was a finalist in a contest but didn't win and ultimately didn't get picked up.

[00:38:22] And I wrote a third book, and that was the book which I eventually got published, but still, it languished on an assistant's editor's desk for a while. I was having no luck getting an agent. I had a

crappy agent for a while who was like, “Hey, this kid's book thing seems fun. Let's do it.” Eventually I got a good agent, and got a good first book deal. And then what happens after that is totally like, interesting. And then from then on, it requires a lot of, like Karen and I have had a lot of cocktails discussing the world of art, the commerce side of the art and commerce once you're in the game, then you have to sort of deal with that purer version of you who just wanted to write these books and wanted to do this thing. But then you kind of are like, you're in the marketplace. You get the feedback from your publishing house about what they want. There's the things they tell you and the things they don't tell you. Sometimes when they don't say anything to you, you realize, you start to kind of second guess yourself. They're like, you wish this was something else, don't you? Like, you wish I was doing something different. Like, and you see what they're excited about. And you meet other authors and you see what they're doing. You see how well other authors are doing. You see what kids are excited about. You get all this external information that starts to really bleed into your, you know, personal process.

[00:39:38] So what I'm saying is, there's an old adage to make sure if you do get a book published, make sure you write your second book before your first book comes out. And the reason is that as soon as your first book comes out, all that information hits you. And suddenly it's not just about you and your art anymore. It's about you and your art and the marketplace, and you will never not be dealing with that again. It's an equation that you have to, you know, make peace with all the time. And I feel like all of my book ideas since those first few, you know, have been to some degree influenced by that, it's not a bad thing to think, what do readers want out there? But it's a really slippery slope, you know, because you can start to, if you start to write for a trend or you start to chase a certain sale, start to chase Hollywood, which is like a fog monster. Hollywood's like the smoke monster from Lost. You're screwed. You're going to destroy yourself, or at least drink a lot of bourbon. You try to you try to find that balance. But it is really exciting to have your, you know, book being read even when it's hard to tell who's reading it. Like, your book comes out and you have no idea what's happening. You're just kind of like, is anyone reading this? If you're lucky, you get some feedback.

[00:40:57] And Karen, your publishing journey?

[00:40:59] Yeah. I am so thankful to hear you say all that. I feel like Kevin, you have to kind of say that to me again every month, about how Hollywood is a fog monster and writing for a particular trend. So before I started down the path of even contacting agents or doing anything, you know, letting the book go anywhere off of my desktop, I had some deep check ins with myself about how do I, sort of, how do I maintain this joy and love that I have for writing and kind of build a special place for it that will not be hurt by whatever happens next? When I approach commerce. I think I've had a lot of luck in that, partially because I did have a poetry community before I started doing this.

[00:41:48] And there are so many people in my poetry world who are like, oh, you write YA? When did you start doing that? You know, like I sort of have this other world of people who, you know what?

[00:41:59] There's not a lot of money in poetry. Not a lot of people are having their poetry lives ruined by success these days.

[00:42:09] So it still is this. I still have this world where the art just kind of gets to be the art, and the joy comes from that. And it's not so much about kind of chasing the smoke monster.

[00:42:23] But I managed to sort of preserve that for myself, with fiction to some degree. You know, I still write fiction for sort of smaller events here in Seattle, where my goal is not to publish it. It's just to kind of push my writing in a new direction, or try out something new, or or have community or, you know, just kind of like get together and share the joy of the art that is not related so much to commerce. So that's been really, really sort of life saving for me inside this whole process. So, that aside, I sort of did that for myself first, and then I started contacting agents. I found my agent out of the slush pile. You know, I sent just a query letter out of the blue. And one piece of advice I would say is, I worked so hard on that query letter, you know? I treated that query letter like a poem that I was fine tuning. For many agents, the only example of your writing they will ever read is your query letter. So it's got to be perfect, honestly. And I had so many people sort of give me notes on my query letter and really, really spent a lot of careful time with that. And I do think that was one of the key reasons I got my agent, and the reason I think that, is he went to the L.A. Books Festival and he said, "I'm giving a talk on query letters, can I use yours as the example of a great query letter?"

[00:43:48] So that said, some agents are editorial agents and others are not. Although that's not a black and white thing, it's fluid. But my agent with me was very editorial and very hands on.

[00:44:03] So he said, you know, you send the first ten pages first, if they're interested. I sent the first ten pages. He said, "I'm loving this! Send the rest of it." And then he wrote me this long email in the middle of the night that said, well, I loved the first half of the book. And he said if you want to take the following suggestions on the second half of the book, send it back to me. It was a big moment for me because I thought, well, I'm a people pleaser.

[00:44:35] Which is a big problem in the publishing world. Big, big problem. Like, I want to take all the suggestions and make everyone happy.

[00:44:43] And that's not a good place to be coming from. I'm still working on that. But I thought, OK, like, avoid the instinct to be a people pleaser right now. What do you think? Do you think he's right about this? And I had to really, again, go deep into my cave and visit myself. And I thought, yeah, he is right. The second half of this book is not working. I went on a retreat, highlighted the second half of my novel, hit delete, and then wrote it over. The beginning of many such such trials because I rewrote this book, dramatic, dramatic rewrites of this book, I would say four or five times before it actually came out. I rewrote it for that agent. Then we sent it out. Got offers from five publishers, had a bidding war for the book. And I do think that really thanks to my agent and his hands on-ness, about that. And you're right about I think, you know, if you have a great agent, they really know the market. They know who the editors are. They're sending it to you. And they know, you know, what's gonna go down. So I feel really thankful about that. But it was also rather heartbreaking because the truth is, it's not the book I set out to write when I was writing it. It's a different thing. And there are days that I love it and days that I don't. A really different experience with the second book. This was the book I set out

to write. It's so similar to the first version that I sent to my editor. And I think it's because of story structure. I think it's because I was studying plot and I really had a map the second time around.

[00:46:24] I should say real quick because we're on a podcast, the Cheryl Klein thing? That woman's a goddess. I love her. She's an editor. I only mentioned that story just because that was an example of, oh, crap, it's *Harry Potter*. I'm gonna hoop jump and please everybody. And, you know, she sent a one sentence e-mail because she's freaking Cheryl Klein. She has a lot to do. She has a lot on her plate. And it is not personal. Like, people just....she took the time and read it. And that's the other thing, you have to have a thick skin. If they don't respond to you or they're turning your book down because they can't do for it what you would need them to do, it's just not a good fit. And I don't think that the editors and agents don't say that because they're trying to give you lip service. They're really not the person for your book. And you don't want someone who's not the person for your book. You need an agent, if you're queering agents, to fall in love, I have a letter that my agent, the one that I went with. It's on my [unintelligible]. But she sent me, it was like this love letter, please, I have to have this book or I'll die. And you say, OK, well, that's, you know. So FYI, Cheryl Klein, if you can get her? Amazing. And then she sent me a lovely letter when my book came out, or tweeted or something, and just said, this is beautiful. And I thought, thank you. Like, she is amazing. But there, you know, editors and agents work. I get e-mails at three in the morning, in the middle of the night. I don't know when, good ones, I don't know when they're not working because all they do is read and read and read and read and edit and edit. And it's it's amazing. And Kevin, you wanted to add something and then we'll make sure we get some questions.

[00:47:50] Just two quick points about that, to back up what Jennifer said. I've published with five different editors now, and in almost every situation that editor hasn't liked some other book. I haven't found an editor yet who has liked everything that I've been working on. I did a book with Arthur Levine, who is who Cheryl Klein works with, and then he didn't like my second book. And then I showed that to the editor of this book and she didn't like it. But then another editor at Harper Collins liked it. And then she liked this book but didn't like this book. And now this book is with an editor at Random House. I'm really lucky, I have an agent who, I guess he's the only guy who likes all my stuff. And I'm I'm really lucky about that. But it's a really personal relationship. You know, it's completely OK to send your thing out and, you know, have four people be like, I mean, I've had people say, like really, really negative things about books that then other editors have been like, yeah, I want this. You know? So that's just how it is. It's just completely and utterly subjective. And that is exactly also what happens when you publish the book. You know, for every person who's like, this is amazing to me, someone's gonna be like, I couldn't even read the first four sentences of this book before I wanted to burn it.

[00:49:00] And I got to put some gifts on that review to show you how badly I hated it.

[00:49:03] Exactly. And just to follow points, what Karen said. I never, ever, ever got a book deal or an agent with my query letters. They sucked. Nothing has ever happened for me with a query letter.

[00:49:15] There is another way. I am so in awe that you were able to write a query letter that got you anywhere. And that other way is to, and you're lucky if you're in Seattle, there's a huge community here. You have to get out in that community. Find the other people who are at your level. Who are aspiring, if you're not already published, who are aspiring to do that. And then SCBWI, which is a society for book writers and illustrators. Western Washington's is particularly strong in young adult. There's the regional, the national. You can you can get yourself critiques with editors and agents at those things. You can meet them, you can talk to them. The people who go to those events are generally open people. You can meet writers. We will never turn down a happy hour. Authors in Seattle will never, or coffee. You can get to know people and those people will know people. I'm not saying use people, but I'm just saying, like, find the community, get yourself. You don't have to be a published author to be in the community. And then once you're in it, you can work it. Meeting people is how I got published.

[00:50:25] So that's how you found your agent was through another writer?

[00:50:29] Yeah, I had sent the novel out and it was with an assistant editor somewhere. And it was not just the query letter. It was one of the times when you were allowed to send sample chapters. If I got to send sample chapters, which I don't even know if people allow anymore. Then it worked. But just the query letter didn't work. And so, yeah, I met someone and I met an author who then referred me on to his agent. And that's I'm not saying that that's a common thing to have happen. It's actually kind of lucky. It was rare, whatever. But I had pretty firmly put myself in the community at that point, you know, and it was a good place to be. So, yeah.

[00:51:09] All right. What questions do you guys have? So for the podcast listeners, the question is why not self publishing on Amazon and Watterson?

[00:51:20] Well, first of all, because they're making traffic really bad in South Lake Union, it's driving me crazy. Kidding.

[00:51:24] Ok. It's the only thing wrong with Amazon. No, I love Amazon, whatever. No, I don't. Oh, my gosh. Wait. REDACTED. Oh, no! Here comes the black helicopter.

[00:51:38] I think it's worth it to try to find a publisher and editor relationship. The editors I work with are so amazing. And when you're writing for teens or kids, a huge piece that you need is the school and library market. And the publishers have worked for years and the independent bookstores have worked for years to develop deep relationships in the communities, with the schools, with the libraries. Librarians have worked for years, too. That's a community. That's a world, that's the world you want your book in, if you're going to write a YA book. I mean, if you want to write a paranormal romance or you want to write a new adult or you want to write Fifty Shades or whatever, like that's fine. That's a whole other community. But I think for teen novels, you want to at least give as much of a shot as you possibly can to being in that world. So, I mean, there's nothing wrong with, you know, putting a book up, doing a self published thing. I self-published the final book of a book series I was working on because my my publisher didn't want it, and I just wanted to get it out there. But that was

kind of a really unique case. And I've since pulled that back. And sold that somewhere else. But yeah, I think you want to have your book in that community. And the editors, that relationship, they make your book better. It's really amazing.

[00:53:04] Yeah, I want to I want to echo that I love local independent bookstores.

[00:53:09] As writers, we must support local independent bookstores. They are the people who are telling readers about your books.

[00:53:20] So that's really important to say. And then I'll just share too, the conventional wisdom, which is, correct me if, you know, you guys have heard differently, but I believe that if you are writing in a genre that is very active online, so, Fantasy, Sci-fi, Romance, particularly, that you will have more luck self-publishing or putting out sample chapters online and trying to get readers who become kind of, following your stuff as your chapters are coming out. I've heard that can work.

[00:53:51] If you were writing contemporary or literary YA, it's kind of a tough sell.

[00:54:02] You mean a tough sell to e-publish? Yeah. Publish ebooks, self-publish ebooks, or just trying to get an online following because of what Kevin said, what you really need is librarians and independent bookstores and schools that are going to get your work out.

[00:54:18] And just briefly, my personal thing, I never wanted to self-publish ever, because I just don't trust myself, and whatever. John Green, good or bad, I think he's a great person. He has a really beautiful essay, actually, about why, I guess it was a pretty divisive essay, but it was about why he traditionally publishes and doesn't self-publish. And there was a line in there that I thought really resonated with me. He was like, if I had just self-published, I don't know what it was, *An Abundance of Katharines* or something, it it would have been, and in my case, too, if I had self-published, it would have been one hundred and thirty thousand words of crap, of no plot. And I mean, my best friend whose brother and sister-in-law are here today was my beta reader, and she is my best friend and has known me since I was eight. And so of course she thought it was perfect. And I was like, oh, you're right. It's beautiful. It's so good. No, it was not good. And I think I owe the world better work than that.

[00:55:14] And for me, I think that means editors and that means people that know what they're doing. And it kind of irks me when people are criticizing especially on Good Reads and crap, which I have to get off there. But they're ripping on your book, and, "you suck, and I know, because I've published twenty books." Then I look and I see that they have self-published twenty books and not to, you know, look down on anything. But I think, you know, I adopted my daughter and I don't go around saying, "I gave birth to my daughter eleven years ago." I did not give birth to her. I did not go through thirty seven hours of things getting ripped up and torn up. Yes, I have a challenge, and she is my child. You know, it's, I don't know. You didn't go through a year and a half of torturous self-doubt and all of these revisions. You pressed upload. So please don't tell me, anyway. End of rant.

[00:56:02] We've all felt that. But it's a different thing.

[00:56:05] It's not bad, or not worse or better. It is just different, and it's different for different themes.

[00:56:09] But it seems a bit unfair, though, to me, to imply that people who self-published haven't gone through dramatic revisions.

[00:56:15] I didn't I didn't mean that. I shouldn't have said that. No, I meant the publishing process. I didn't mean that you're not a writer. You're every bit a writer. I just meant the word, publishing. It's different to publish, you know what I mean? Of course, oh my God, no. The writing is no less torturous, of course. The work is no less valid. It's not that at all. I feel like if you've spent this time and you've written this book, it is hard and it does take a lot longer.

[00:56:39] But, make the decision ultimately based on, you know, whether it's working out or not, or what you want to do or how long you want to wait.

[00:56:48] I mean, it's all a personal decision. But you know, to me, it's like the best editors in the world are with the publishing houses. And it's at least worth getting a shot to, you know, to work with them and do that and have an art department make a cover that you hate and all kinds of other things, I know I'm being sarcastic now. Anyway.

[00:57:06] My favorite book was one that was self-published first and then picked up later. *Tinkers*, by Paul Harding. I think that was self-published and then got picked up by a by a small university press. That's like the most beautiful book I've ever read in my life. So. Yeah. And that won a Pulitzer Prize. Self-publishing. Hello. And it won the Pulitzer.

[00:57:23] Did we answer that. OK. All kinds of questions.

[00:57:28] I would say just go for it. Just you know, especially if you feel you have an important story to tell. We don't know how long our lives are going to be, right? I mean, just to really go there, like if you have an important story to tell, go home today and start writing that story. And don't worry about what's going to happen, you know, if and when you try and publish it. And it's been a really different experience for everyone. You know, as I've met more authors and kind of ask them about their process. It seems like it varies tremendously from person to person. So write that important story.

[00:58:02] Also, there'll be one day when you're, like, working on it, because awesome things start to happen. It's a positive feedback loop. If you just write everyday, if you put in the time like word by word, more things will happen. So someday, you'll be working on it and you're mad at it. Or you'll be doing something different. You like mowing the lawn, or whatever, and some other story idea's gonna pop into your head and you gonna be like, whoa. And, maybe you'll spend a half an hour writing up that idea, or maybe you'll write a couple chapters about that and who knows. Then suddenly you might take a left turn and be like, no, this is the thing I want to do. Like, you don't really know. But, it's about doing the craft and going down that path. You know, I always tell students that, for every one

book I have finished, I have like ten word files. More like twenty, that are just like starts. Excitements, inspirations. Things I want to write more than anything else, but I just can't get it. I haven't gotten it yet. And, you know, it's just not happening. So you keep working and keep writing.

[00:59:03] I have a recommendation of an author. Kekla Magoon is a woman of color who is writing tremendous books for young adults. I think she's written five so far. I would recommend her. And, you know, my feeling about that is more writers of color writing for young adults. And I think that question goes really deep to how do we support writers and how do we support people getting to that point where, you know, as we've talked today, people are ready to query agents and ready, you know, have completed their novels. And I think that goes deep to the question of arts education. You know, when people are younger teens, you know, how do we make arts education more accessible to all youth, including youth of color? And how do we support artists? Right. How do we in this country, like do we give enough grant money to writers? Do we, you know, have programs that support artists having health care and questions like that? And, you know, I just think it's such a deep and broad kind of structural change that we need to encourage. But we also need to be promoting more voices of writers of color.

[01:00:21] One of the things, so when I was writing, I wrote my first novel, and it's about African-American students in this school that I taught in, and I felt like it was just about them in school. And I showed it to some of my teacher friends before it got published. And they were like, what I like the most about this book is that it's about our students, but it's not about like it's not about our students, you know, being Haitian, it's about kids in a school adventure. It just happens to be these kids. And that is something that I like. Why am I telling that story? I don't know. It's self-centered, it sounds like right on the edge of self promotion, which is not my point. But I think that stories, there are more ways to include the vast diversity of our population into the kind of stories we like to tell. And I feel like any writer or any kid, especially the youth you're working with, they can write any kind of story and it can be connected to them and it can be connected to like, fantasy just doesn't have to be about blonde girls and tall boys. You know, it's possible for the characters to be in all those worlds.

[01:01:33] Gentleman in the red t shirt. Yes.

[01:01:36] You see this heart on the cover of my book. This was a really interesting conversation. There's actually a female narrator in this book, which for a whole other reason, I mean, it was of a long line of thinking that led to that. But the thought is that a lot of YA books that are being actually purchased or being purchased by females eighteen and up. Kind of. So, my editor, is very sometimes unknowingly kind of cognizant of that. And she's like, well, we need females to buy your book. And so we need the cover to appeal to them. And I feel like this book is kind of gender equal. I feel like it's just as good a story for, you know, for a boy as for a girl. And we had a lot of difficult conversations about the cover because I feel like the cover came out as something that, like a boy would be hesitant to pick up, because it's got a freaking heart on the cover and some pink. And the paperback is going to be black and there's no pink on it and it is a lot edgier. But, yeah, there's this sense that if you want your book to sell, girls need to be buying it. But I feel like, if you go into schools, you realize there are just as many boy readers. You know, I don't know where the answer is.

[01:02:56] As a librarian, we are desperate for books with boy protagonists and protagonists who are people of color. So, that doesn't mean the publishers are going to listen to us. But librarians are looking for them for sure.

[01:03:13] So I don't think it's a detriment, though. Like I think lots of awesome books and lots of books that I've done really well have male protagonists. I think, like, if you're thinking of writing something, don't force it. Don't change it to be a girl just because you're like, oh, that'll sell the book. You know. Right, just as many boys like reading.

[01:03:34] So I do see there's one more question. Anybody else? OK. So great. Let's get your question and then we'll do some book signing.

[01:03:47] And this is beta readers. Do you? My daughter started my book and then said it was a little confusing and so she hasn't. But I think she's younger than my demographic.

[01:03:58] My personal kids are too young. My daughter's nine and my son is four. I really want to write something for them. I'm actually working on something right now. I'm really obsessed with writing something that my daughter can read. She's a struggling reader in fourth grade. I have used select teens with their parents permission as beta readers for certain things. Maybe just for like a chapter now and then or something more. I'm like, I'd be curious about your response. But yeah, not my kids yet. Have you ever done that?

[01:04:26] I have not. No, I haven't. And you know, part of that I do think is leftover from poetry.

[01:04:33] Like, I sort of, it takes a while for me to know someone well enough and to trust them deeply enough to have them be a beta reader. So I'm actually just now kind of coming around to having a couple of people I know read the fiction.

[01:04:53] Thank you so much, everyone, for being here. And thank you so much to our authors for all these great, great, great thoughts

[01:05:10] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening. [music]