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Tami Charles

# 210: Showing the Diversity within Diversity

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello, hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at diymfa.com/210 because it's Episode 210.

OMG! Today, I have the pleasure of welcoming Tami Charles to the show. Tami is a former teacher and a full-time author of picture books, Middle Grade, and Young Adult novels, as well as nonfiction. As a teacher, she made it her mission to introduce her students to all types of literature, but especially, to diverse books.

And while it was refreshing to see something of a better selection of books available to her students than what she had as a child, she still felt like there weren't nearly as many diverse books as she had hoped for. This is why she decided to reignite her passion of writing, and she's written several books, but today we're going to be talking about her Middle Grade novel, a gorgeous, gorgeous novel titled Like Vanessa. Welcome, Tami. It is so great to have you on the show.

**Tami Charles:** Hello. Hello.

**GP:** I'm so excited, and it's so fun to have you here. Just for like our listeners' sake too, Tami and I had the pleasure of meeting at BookExpo a couple of weeks back. It's super fun to actually be connecting now on the phone and on this interview after having met in person already. So, it's super, super fun.

One of the things that I always like to start out by asking, and it helps me to get a little context, helps our listeners get a little bit of context about the story. Can you tell us the story behind the story? What made you choose to write Like Vanessa, this particular book, this particular story, at this moment in time?

**TC:** I have been writing, like most writers, forever. Even as a child, I wrote stories and I read lots of stories. No one, I say this all the time, no one really told me that I could be an author. So, it was like the stories that I read as a child featured kids didn't look like me or didn't have the same experiences that I had. Nonetheless, I still loved those stories like Ramona Quimby and Anastasia Krupnik. I mean, my gosh, those were my jams, but I didn't know that I could actually do that. I actually thought you had to be rich, which now that I'm a writer, I know that that's not the case.

[laughter]

**TC:** What happened was once I started teaching and I started diving back into stories, my students would read some of my work and they would be like, "Wow, Ms. Charles, you know, why don't you try again?" So, I said, "Okay, well, let me try writing some stories."

But here's where I messed up. I tried to recreate the stories of my childhood. I was writing all these stories about, like, kids who lived in the perfect suburbs and they had perfect boyfriends and they drove off in their convertibles into the sunset. And it's like, that's not my life. That's not how I grew up.

It didn't dawn on me until I had lunch, well, dinner with an editor from Calkins Creek. Her name is Carolyn Yoder. We just had a casual dinner and she was asking me about my life. She had known the stories that I was writing at the time kept getting rejected. But she said to me; she paused and she goes, "Why aren't you writing about all these interesting things that you just told me about?" And I'm like, "I don't know, because, I guess, I didn't think that I could sell a book that way."

So, I went home and I stood on that for a little bit, and I was like, "Wow, you know, she makes a good point." And if I were to write up, you know, for my teenage self, I had to think about what's one defining moment for me in my teen years, and that was I did my first pageant at 13 years old. I thought about that. You know, when I did my first pageant, my mom came home one day. She had this flyer that she had gotten in the mall, I guess there was like a table and people were passing out flyers. "Do You Want To Be In A Pageant?" or something like that, the headline said. She comes home, she gives me this flyer, and I look at the flyer and I'm like, "Yeah, of course, I'll do this."

I had never done anything like that before, but I spent my childhood watching Miss America and, you know, singing and the performing arts. That was my thing. So, I'm like, "Oh, you got to have a talent to do this? Absolutely." I knew that I was able to give it a shot because I had seen other girls like myself actually come through the pageant world and make something of themselves.

But then my writer brain was thinking, what if a girl sees a flyer like that and thinks the opposite? That's how Like Vanessa was born. It's about a 13-year-old girl who watches Miss America every year. It's set in the early 80s. Even though she watches it with dreams in her eyes she never sees a brown girl win until Vanessa Williams won in 1983. What would that look like? So, that's where the story came from, really. It's kind of like my experience, but the flip side of it. I knew I could do it because I'd already seen those role models, but imagine if a teen wants to do something, but has no real role models to know that she can shoot for something like that.

**GP:** Isn't that the way it is, too, like, in just about anything? Whenever there's the person who does it first, all those teenagers, all those kids growing up before that person did it first, didn't know it was even possible. I mean, imagine living in the 1950s before people had gone into outer space. That was considered mind-blowing. Us now, looking back on those movies who go, "Oh, how quaint."

**TC:** It's nothing.

**GP:** "People went to the moon. That's so cool." We don't really think about how awe inspiring. The one for me that like gives me chills every time I think about it, was the first time a color film ever happened. Can you imagine what it must have been like to be in the audience of the Wizard of Oz, and that moment where Dorothy opens the door? It gives me chills just thinking about it, because imagine people in the audience who had never seen color on a film screen before and suddenly it's like, you know—And it's not just color, it's Technicolor. I mean, that's just eerie.

**TC:** Exactly. It's a big moment.

**GP:** It's a big moment. And I can totally see how for, just in general, for anybody, that how the moment Vanessa Williams winning Miss America was a big moment and eye-opening. That had never been done before.

So, in terms of building this character, since you kind of took something from your own life, but then flipped it around, what was the process of putting together the story from that point on, because it's not like you could just draw from your own life experience verbatim, because it was this sort of flip side of it. But I'm guessing that there might have been some inspiration from your own pageant experiences that filtered into Like Vanessa. So, how did you pull the story together and build it out once you had landed on this premise?

**TC:** Well, I remember when I was 13 and I said I wanted to participate in a pageant, which I had never done. You know how it is. There's always going to be a hater or five.

[laughter]

**TC:** That's pretty much what happened. My family was very supportive, and I even had supportive friends, but there were a couple of people who were like, "No, you can't do that. You shouldn't do that. You're not good enough." Just all of these naysayers, who sometimes—And I think, especially in our youth, we let that get in our head, you know? I definitely had to draw from that experience.

It was really important for me to show how you mentioned earlier, the flip side of that. My Vanessa, she's an African American girl. And yes, the real Vanessa who won Miss America is also black as well. But in looking at her, she presented a different ideal of black beauty. She, Vanessa Williams, has blueish green eyes, sometimes they're grey, I think, but she has these very light eyes and she had light hair and she had light skin. And meanwhile, my Vanessa, even though she's inspired by this moment to see a woman of color win, she still doubts her own ability and potential to make that type of history herself because she's looking at a different standard of beauty.

So, it was important for me to draw on that as well, because I find that in certain POC communities, especially in black communities, there's this thing called colorism that really impacts how we see ourselves, our self-esteem, our self concept. It becomes a tough thing where you're measuring yourself against someone else's physical features. It was important for me to show that while Vanessa Williams won, and she was gorgeous then and she's equally gorgeous now, it was important to show a different side of black beauty; one where the character is extremely dark-skinned, but finds her beauty in that regardless.

**GP:** So much interesting stuff in there that we need to unpack. I mean, one of them is that idea—I mean, I think the colorism that you mentioned is very specific, I think, to people of color. But I think if we expand that concept of like, this idea of never quite being whatever enough, right? Like, I'm not black enough, or I'm not Hispanic, or like the fact—For instance, one of the things that is constantly, I beat myself up about is my parents are immigrants, and I'm Brazilian and I speak Portuguese and yet, I don't look Brazilian. I don't look South American. People look at me and they see a white girl. And so it's very strange. There's that feeling of like, "I'm not foreign enough, I'm not this enough." What does "enough" really mean?

I think that's something that people who are writing about diversity or diverse characters often have to grapple with. The characters themselves are often grappling with this question. So, can you talk a little bit more about how that plays out in the book?

**TC:** Well, it plays out in the book mainly because it played out in my life. [laughs] Growing up, you know, I've been told myself, like—You know, I'm on the lighter side, I have freckles. When I was younger, I was a lot lighter. I was actually so light you could see the blue veins in my face. [laughs]

**GP:** Wow.

**TC:** So, it was like, I am a woman of color, I am a black woman, but I have some other culture sprinkled in there. So yeah, I've heard that I'm not this, I'm not that, I'm not black enough, or I'm too white to be black, or my hair is not good enough. I had to pour all of that into the character, just because these were things that I heard in my own life growing up as a young girl in Newark. And if they weren't things that I heard or they weren't things that were said to me, I've heard them said to other people.

For me, I always, always stress like, "Okay, you can write about a specific character from a specific cultural background." Like, say yourself, you're Brazilian, which I got to say, I had no idea. [laughs] I thought you were Portuguese. But here's the thing, though, there is no single experience that you can just thrust onto one person and their culture. You can't say like, "Okay, I wrote about a black girl in 1983, Newark, New Jersey." What she goes through in the novel, that's not the single black experience. As people we are diverse. There's diversity within the diversity, if that makes sense.

**GP:** Absolutely.

**TC:** So, you can't really put labels on someone because they're from a certain culture. My girl, she sings by the end of the novel. My Vanessa is singing Italian opera. I mean, she's singing Puccini.

**GP:** Wow.

**TC:** Does that mean that's not a black thing? No, it means that that's just something that she likes and that's something that she learned, which by the way I did that, I had to throw that in there—

[laughter]

**TC:** —because it was something that was different for me as a girl who was new to pageants. I could have easily gone on stage and sang a gospel song, but it's so much more dynamic than that. Why not have a black girl from Newark sing in Italian? I wanted to show that we are complex. We are complex people.

**GP:** I think that's really where—You know, these stories about diverse characters, that's where really they come to life for me. When it's no longer a story about an issue or a story about a group, but it becomes about the individual character. I think that's to where a lot of people who, sort of, don't appreciate this need for diverse stories, don't realize—It's like, it's not about having more black characters or more Hispanic characters or more LGBTQ characters and stories; it's about having individual characters that we can care about.

One of the things that I also thought was really interesting about this book, and I think it'll sort of tie back—There's still stuff I want to unpack from what we've talked about before, but I want to keep opening up the topic, is the deliberate choice, or at least, it seems, it feels deliberate to me, and you can tell me whether it was or not, of making this a, not just a middle grade, but an upper middle grade. It's not quite YA, but it's a little older than your typical; and I'm doing air quotes here; it's like in that kind of, they call them tween books, but they're not. No one really uses that term, but it's like that weird no man's land between middle grade, like, upper middle grade and YA. Was that a deliberate choice? Is that where the story gravitated to, and what are some of the challenges or advantages writing in that voice? You could have just as easily made this a YA. There are certainly YA books about characters this age that are, sort of, in the young YA realms. What was that choice about making it a middle grade story?

**TC:** First of all, the choice was selfish [laughs] because I was 13 and in the eighth grade when I first did, when I did my very first pageant and I wanted to stay true to that experience. And that really stems back from the dinner and conversation that I had with Carolyn Yoder. She's like, "You need to write about that." I took that advice and I ran with it. I just couldn't see the story being told from the point of view of like a 16-year-old.

I thought about it, but I'm like, "You know what, it's eighth grade." Here was—like a really important thing for me was I wanted her to get a scholarship that would've put her in a position to have some type of other high school experience, something extraordinary, something where she could travel, something that pulled her out of her current environment yet still allowed her to appreciate where she came from. And for me, eighth grade. There was no other choice, but to make her an eighth grader.

As far as the challenges, when I first started querying agents, oh my goodness; I had some agents telling me, "Oh, this is YA, for sure." And then I had others saying, "This is not YA. This is middle grade." And then I had some who told me, "You can't sell this because is no such thing as writing a 14-year-old character." My character turned 14 in the novel. So, it was like, "No, there's no room for 14-year-old characters. You either make them 13 or 16; and there's nothing in between." I'm happy to say that I broke whatever that stereotype is.

[laughter]

**GP:** I'm so glad you did, selfishly because I also like writing right in that zone that seventh, eighth grade zone. And it's like, there aren't enough books in that area. It's like either high school or it's like they're still in fifth, sixth grade and it's clearly very middle school, you know? Iit's funny, even some books like Diary Of A Wimpy Kid, the character is in eighth grade, but it's still geared to the fifth, sixth, seventh grade set, like it's—

**TC:** Even third grade.

**GP:** Yeah.

**TC:** Even third grade. My son loves that series. Yeah. It's very easy. You know, it doesn't have too many issues. But there's some heavy issues in my book, which makes it skew older. But then there's the innocence of finding yourself, coming of age and really thinking about what's my place in the world? Those are very solid Middle Grade themes. So, that's what makes it kind of both.

**GP:** You know, the other thing too is, as I'm reading it, and I keep—These are literally the questions that I ask myself. I'm like, "Well, what if this was a younger YA, how would this story play out? No, no, that wouldn't work."

What would, what if, what would it look like if the same story was a 16-year-old? I feel like if it was older, it would be a little too gritty. It's like, that word "innocence" is so perfect because there is something about Vanessa in the story that's so, or Nessy, that's so wide-eyed and hopeful, that I feel like by the time, if she didn't have that opportunity at the, in eighth grade—

**TC:** It's too late.

**GP:** It's too late. Like, she's going to be jaded. It's not going to be the same Nessy in high school.

**TC:** Very true. I'm telling you, I tried, I so tried to write her as a 16-year-old, and it just did not feel right at all. But can I tell you, there is a follow-up novel for the people who have read Like Vanessa,

or if they're still reading, there's a character in Like Vanessa who is essentially the bully in this story. The follow-up novel covers her life and her backstory. We will see, Beatriz start as 15 years old, and in by 16 years old. So, that'll be more solidly YA. It'll be like solid YA. There's some stuff in there, [laughs] but yeah, she has a harder background. There's some tough stuff that she's dealt with in her younger years, and you'll see where it backtracks and moves forward. But I couldn't do that for Vanessa. It just didn't feel right.

**GP:** I also, I have to say strategically, I love what you're doing with having Vanessa slightly younger. And then, as your readers grow up, now you're going to have Beatriz. It's kind of like the J. K. Rowling strategy. That's pretty freaking brilliant, if you think about it.

**TC:** Listen, you put me in any sentence with J. K. Rowling, and I'm good to go. Thank you. [laughs]

**GP:** But seriously, it's kind of awesome, because if you think about it, the readers who are reading Like Vanessa right now at age 12, 13, by the time Beatriz's story comes out, are going to be ready. Like, they're going to be in middle—They're going to be ready for YA, like a younger YA, and boom, there you go. Then you need to pick another character and have them at like 17, 18, right? And continue the trend.

**TC:** That has been requested. It's so funny because—I mean, I haven't really talked to my editor about this, but I have gotten a few requests. Like, "Oh, I just finished Like Vanessa. I heard that book two is all about Beatriz." And then I get, "Are you going to write about TJ and Genito for book three?" And I'm like, "There is no book three, but that could be something."

**GP:** Well, don't worry. We'll keep it right here; between you, me, and, you know, thousands of listeners.

**TC:** There we go.

**GP:** We'll be here, counting the days.

**TC:** No big deal. If you want it, just tweet my editor, Karen Boss. There we go.

**GP:** Another thing that I really love, and while you've got, and it'll be really interesting for me. Obviously, you don't have to comment with regard to future book or books because they haven't been written yet or they're in the process. But one of the things I love that I hope you carry over into the other ones, is the snippets of poetry or rather the little details that come from the character's life.

In the case of Vanessa, it really is the diary is so important and the poetry is so important to her. I love how we have these like little one-page snippets throughout the book, kind of, whenever there's a key transition, I think, between chapters, that's what it feels like to me, that I was hoping you could talk about the craftsmanship that came with crafting those individual little snippets, and then the placement of them in the book.

Where did you—Why did you decide to put them where you put them? Because at first, I thought it was going to be whenever every chapter started, but it wasn't. There's some places where chapters, we get several chapters and then we get another diary entry. So, I knew that that was an intentional moment, but I wanted to hear from you how you strategically crafted that.

**TC:** I've been a singer all my life. I don't do it anymore. And please, don't ask me to bust out in songs.

**GP:** Don't worry, don't worry.

**TC:** These all over, but I've sung all my life. I used to write songs. I was in a singing group. We had our little heyday, our little Beyonce, Destiny's Child moment for like five minutes, but we wrote lots of songs. I just felt like Vanessa would be a character who's expressive like that. It's one thing to just, as a writer, I could easily just write, "Vanessa is sad," right? But that does nothing for the reader. I had to think about, how do I really pull the reader into what she's feeling? I just feel like Vanessa so would have expressed herself in poetry.

Growing up, I read a lot of Maya Angelou. I still do. I thought about how her poems have impacted me, and those subtle ways that she just really makes the reader feel. I thought that that was the best way for me to pull the reader in, was for Vanessa to write her own poems. Some of the poems—I don't think all of them rhyme. There might be some that have a little bit of rhyme. You know, I don't really have a rhyme or reason, I should say, to how I wrote the poems. It was just all about defining the moment. I really just like all type of poetry.

I have to tell you, in the follow-up book, Becoming Beatriz, Beatriz is not a poet, but there is some poetry in that book, but the poetry comes from outside forces. These poems and pictures that she finds and she reads, and it impacts her. One of the poems, ooh, I'm giving away a secret here, but one of the poems happens to be written by Vanessa.

**GP:** Oh my gosh, I just got chills. I just got chills.

**TC:** She finds it. Yeah, she finds a poem that's written by Vanessa. So, me as a writer, I love poetry. I have to sneak that in, I guess, with just about everything I write, but I knew that for Beatriz, there's no way that this girl who's tough and rough and in a gang, she's not whipping out a diary to write poems. She's not going to do that, but she does come across them. Poetry can have an effect on anyone, if you find the right poem.

**GP:** Absolutely. I could totally see Beatriz as sort of like a scavenger, like a collector of little snippets of cool stuff like poems and pictures, and whatever.

**TC:** Oh, you'll see. You'll see what she collects in book two.

**GP:** That'll be—Oh, oh my gosh. I can't wait. The other piece of it too, like, with each of those poems, we also get a snippet of the diary. I got to know, why does—I mean, I know why my diary had a name, but I need to know why Vanessa's diary has a name.

**TC:** [laughs] Because she is way too cool to say she has a diary. You know what? She doesn't have siblings, she's an only child. Again, that's me pulling from my own experience. I do have a brother, but he is significantly younger than I am. So, I think that Vanessa, feeling that loneliness for all those years, growing up in a house of men, it's her dad, her Pop Pop, and her cousin, TJ, of course she would name the diary after a girl, because that girl is like her sister and that's who she chills with at night when she's home alone in her room, because her dad doesn't really talk to her. Her grandfather is passed out on the couch. Her cousin is, like, sneaking out at night. So, of course, she's going to name her diary a girl's name, like a sister.

**GP:** You know, what's interesting too is, and this is of course, such a product of the times. I mean, I'm a kid of the 80s. I grew up in the 80s and early 90s. So, this was before, gasp, computers, before people could write emails to each other. How did my friends and I stay in touch with each other over

summer vacations? We wrote letters.

I remember I had several diaries that I named, and it was like I was writing a letter to a person. It just happened to sit in a book as opposed to getting put in the mail. So, it totally made sense to me, as a, you know, as a kid of the 80s, but it's also interesting for me, I would always agonize over what am I going to name this next diary. Each diary had a different name.

And so I feel like names are really important in this story. Can you talk a little bit about the naming of the different characters, and how they're important? I mean, obviously, Vanessa's name is significant, but can you talk a little bit about the significance of some of these names?

**TC:** Absolutely. Well, starting with Vanessa, I had to name her after, you know, the first woman of color to win Miss America. I just couldn't—I was like, "No, she has to have the same name because, at least, even if they don't look alike, she could, at least, see a piece of herself just in name alone." Not to mention Vanessa Williams is a singer. My character, Vanessa Martin, is also a beautiful singer. So, I needed her to be able to find her likeness in there somewhere.

**GP:** Even the lilt of the names; like Vanessa Williams, Vanessa Martin. Their last names both have two syllables with the emphasis on the—There's like a rhythmic lilt, a parallel there, right?

**TC:** I did not think about that. Yeah.

**GP:** That's your writery subconscious right there.

**TC:** Yes. Let's go with that. The way you said it sounds good.

[laughter]

**TC:** A lot of the characters in the book, so I kind of write about—I write about people, but when I'm thinking about naming them, I have, you know, just an interesting bunch of family, and I kind of warn them. I'm like, "I'm taking your name, it's going to be in my novel," jokingly, but then I really do it.

[laughter]

**TC:** Those names are people in my family, basically. Beatriz; there's Tanisha, my cousin. Let's see, TJ. TJ, I actually based him off of a student that I had years ago who had the same struggles as TJ. I was his fifth grade teacher. I could tell right away that he was not being his true self at school, so, I based the name off of my experience with a former student, who's doing great now, by the way. Pop Pop, that's what I called my Pop Pop. And let me tell you, he is almost parallel to what I've written in the book. My grandfather had half of a leg, it was amputated. He loved the Lord, but he also loved whiskey.

[laughter]

**TC:** It's like some of these characters are drawn from people in my life; mainly my family. That's really where the names come from. One of my best friends, her name is Julixa, and there a character there who's a little bit more prominent in Book Two. So yeah, just characters named from my family. Eventually, I'm going to run out of names though.

[laughter]

**GP:** Well, what always fascinates me too when I read stories, particularly, like family stories is the way different members of the family address each other. Like, there's a significant difference between calling, for instance, a mother, "mom" versus "mommy" versus "mama" versus calling her by her first name. It says something, even just in that moment, when a writer makes a decision that the character's going to call his or her mother "mom," as opposed to "mama." That is going to immediately signal to the reader something very different about the relationship than if it was "mommy" or "Susan" or whatever, you know? And so like, these are all like little—As writers, often, we don't even think about it while we're writing. I feel like for me, often when I'm writing, it's an instinctive thing, I just do it. But then after the fact, I'm like, "Oh, that's what that means."

**TC:** Yeah, exactly. I mean, she calls her grandfather Pop Pop. Like I said, that's what I called my grandfather. I didn't call him grandfather or granddad—

**GP:** Or grandpa.

**TC:** Yeah, or grandpa.

**GP:** Or grumps or—

**TC:** Yeah. No, it was just Pop Pop. And daddy, I still call my dad that. I don't even call him Dad. Doesn't even sound right; no, it's daddy. So, like I said, a lot of this comes from my own upbringing, just little names that I've used in my family.

**GP:** Love it. So, I wanted to circle back a little bit to where we started with the topic of diversity and diverse books. This is something that's become so important and something that I love to talk about on this show because I think there's so many different perspectives that need to be shared on this topic. As you wrote—I mean, clearly as you were writing this, you shared how, essentially, we're almost pushed in the direction of writing about your own experience when you were leaning towards writing toward a different experience. But for a lot of people, like, they might struggle with this idea of feeling confident enough to sharing and writing and drawing from their own lives; especially, when it feels like, and I'm making air quotes here, feels like the market wants something different, even though maybe the market doesn't really want it, but it feels like that.

Can you talk a little bit about how you stepped into that role of writing and drawing from your own experience, writing something really true to who you are as opposed to what you thought the world wanted?

**TC:** Well, I thought the world wanted more Ramonas, you know, the stories that I read of my day, but when I really took a step back and I thought about what was said to me, how I should be writing from an authentic place. I found a lot of value in that. Yes, I do want to write about places that I've been, the people that I've grown up with, experiences that I've had as a kid. But I have to tell you on the flip side of that, I certainly don't want to be pigeonholed. Okay? I just want to write stories that reflect who I am, reflect what I've learned or even what I'm learning. I feel like as a writer, I should be able to write whatever it is that I want, be it an African American girl from Newark or a Puerto Rican girl living in the hills of Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. If it's something that I feel strongly about and I can do the work to make sure that it is told authentically, then yes, I feel like I should have the right to do that.

Does that mean everyone has the right? I don't know. I'm not saying that you have to be from a certain culture to write that specific character. For example, one of the books that I always bring up that I love is A Long Walk to Water by Linda Sue Park. I mean, this book is set in the continent of Africa. Linda Sue Park is not African, she's Asian. I don't care. [laughs] She wrote the heck out of

that book. She told a beautiful story, but if I'm going to say, "people should be able to write whatever they want," first of all, you have to do the work.

But before you even do the work, you should be asking yourself; if this is a story that I want to write, what am I doing as a writer to uplift the real writers of color who could, and probably should be telling this story? Do I support them? Do I uplift them? Do I retweet them? Do I go to the store and buy their books? Because if the answers to those questions are no, then you should probably stay in your lane.

There's two ways of looking at that. I wholeheartedly believe in diverse books. These are the types of books that I feel as an author, I will write until the end of my days. But does that mean I never want to write a story about a white girl living in space? No. If I want to write that story, then I feel like I should be able to write it.

However, I don't think I will, though. [laughs] Just for the simple fact that I'm a mom and I have a son. I want him to open books and see himself in the book because I don't want him to grow up in a world where by the time he gets to my age, he's saying the same things that I said, which is, "Oh, I didn't see that many books growing up with characters like me." So, as a writer, it's my duty to make sure that in the very least, most of my work reflects something that my son can share with his children and pass down.

**GP:** So much juicy stuff in there that I want to unpack. One is I love how you delved into and sort of elaborated on, essentially, the ideas and sometimes the potential controversy around the #ownvoices movement that I think sometimes people will react negatively to this because they feel as though voices are being silenced. And yet, I think the way you explained it is really powerful because it's not so much about silencing the not #ownvoices. It's about making sure that the people who are not #ownvoices and stepping in and writing these stories, even if they're doing it authentically, that they are also supporting the #ownvoices that should be telling those same stories.

**TC:** Absolutely.

**GP:** It's not like—You know, there's room for everybody at the table. It's just a question of, there's room for all of us at the diversity table. It's just a question of making sure that we leave room open for the #ownvoices authors, who are the ones who need to tell those stories because they've had those experiences.

Another thing that I think is really interesting too, and you know, the diversity movement, I think, has done a lot in terms of talking about racial diversity, at least, in terms of we need diverse books and different organizations, racial diversity, and also LGBTQ. One of the areas that I love seeing a little bit more, and I think there's some stuff happening, but it's a little behind, is the area of characters with disabilities. I think that we haven't seen as many of those, and that's something that I really hope that we have more of, because it is another area of diversity where it's important for students to see characters who have, to see themselves. And it's not just about black characters seeing other, black people seeing black characters on the page, and LGBTQ kids seeing LGBTQ characters. It's about a child also seeing a character who has a disability, who's like them and who is able to, who's being a real kid on the page.

**TC:** Exactly. It's not all about their disability. That's just kind of like a back-thought. It's not, "No, guess what, this kid with this disability can do the same normal things that kids in other books are doing." That's really important. Those are the types of books that I want my son reading.

**GP:** That actually brings up another interesting thought too. One of the things I actually struggle with because while—You know, for me, my struggles are not visible, but I have bipolar disorder. It's something I have shared multiple times on this show. You very rarely see books for kids about mental illness, particularly kids struggling with a very severe mental illness, in part, because these illnesses don't usually start taking shape until a kid is a teenager, so it's rare to see an 11-year-old struggling with something like that. And yet, I think it's really important, you hit the nail on the head, of a kid, not just seeing a character overcoming an obstacle, whether that obstacle is brought on because of physical disability, or race, or sexuality, or something that's been barring their way. But that it's part of who they are, and yet they're doing other stuff. The sort of issue-driven. I feel like we're past the issue-driven diversity story. That that's sort of a thing of the 1990s, and it's time to have real kids with, and diversity is just part of the picture.

**TC:** Exactly, real kids doing just normal things too.

**GP:** Yeah, and that's what I love about Vanessa, is that it's a story about a kid and a pageant, and yet, it's got all these other issues and she's grappling with these things. But the pageant thing is something that is pretty—I mean, it's not something I was part of because it just wasn't part of my consciousness, but it's something that a lot of kids from lots of different parts of life will relate to. And so that, to me, feels like it's a regular kid doing regular kid stuff. And then there are all these other things she's grappling with.

**TC:** So, the way I see it is this, you take the pageant, take away the pageant and just leave a blank. Now, fill in the blank. What other activities can a child be interested in entering where that specific child would have some problems? Meaning someone tells them, "Oh, well, you shouldn't try out for the soccer team. You can barely kick the ball." It's the same as, "Well, you shouldn't do this pageant because you're not pretty enough." And "You shouldn't try out for cheerleading because of," whatever ridiculous reason that people can come up with. It literally is one of those things, where even—For some people, a pageant might not be normal and it's not, but if you really think about what the pageant is at its core, it's nothing more than a school activity, right?

**GP:** Yeah.

**TC:** So, kids in middle school, there's all kind of clubs. This is just simply another club. I could have easily taken out the pageant and replaced it with the chess club or debate team, but then I would lose Vanessa Williams. So, I [laughs] had to put that in there because for me, that was the whole heart of the story, is seeing someone who has broken a barrier to a world that you thought was closed off to you.

**GP:** I think what you just gave us is such a great rubric framework for thinking about how to craft an authentic story, regardless of whether the character in the story, whether someone's choosing to write a diverse character or not, but essentially, figuring out the obstacle for the character and then putting them in the situation that will tap into that very struggle, that is the deepest, the hardest for that character. I love it.

You've teased at what's next for us, so unless there's anything else you want to share—But I wanted to just give you the opportunity if you have something coming up to give us a little bit of a teaser.

**TC:** Yes, actually. [laughs]

**GP:** Woo.

**TC:** Like I mentioned, book two, it's entitled Becoming Beatriz, and it's all about the bully in book one of Like Vanessa. Here's the thing, with Like Vanessa, I really wanted to drive home the point that you don't need to be like anyone else, as much as Vanessa really wanted to be like Vanessa Williams, in the end, she learns that she really just needs to be herself. She needs to like herself, and really, that is something I think that children struggle with. I could tell you right now as an adult, I still struggle with that. It's that kind of sentiment that readers of all ages can relate to.

But with book two, this is a redemption story. Here's the point that I want to drive home for readers, young readers, but, readers of all ages; and that is this; people make mistakes. We have all made mistakes. The Beatriz that is presented in Like Vanessa is probably not the person that most readers would want to strive to become. But in the midst of those mistakes that you make, there's a lesson in them. You should not focus on what you were. Focus on who you're becoming. That's really the point of book two, which is why I titled it Becoming Beatriz. We see Beatriz Mendez as a bully in book one, but I promise you, in book two, you will appreciate the person that she becomes, so I can't wait until that comes out. That comes out next August, 2019.

**GP:** Awesome. Well, that is so exciting. I cannot wait. I always like to end with the same question. What is your number one tip for writers?

**TC:** Oh, that. [laughs] Just one? [laughs]

**GP:** If you want to give us 10 or 20.

**TC:** Or 100. Number one tip for writers: blinders on, don't worry about what other people are doing, specifically writers. Put your blinders on, you come up with your own strategy. I wake up 4:30 in the morning most mornings, I get my butt in the chair and I write. And that may not work for your listeners or one of your listeners.

**GP:** It doesn't work for me, I will tell you that.

**TC:** But see, for me, it works because I have a child and I try to get it done before he goes to school. I was a teacher for 14 years and that was my only time. I'd wake up at like 4:00, 4:30. And then I was out the door by 7:00 AM because I had to teach. So, it was like that was my only time in the day to get it done.

But really, put your blinders on. Don't worry about what other writers are doing, but here's the thing—and I don't say that to be arrogant. You know, you can still support other writers because there's so many authors out there that I love. I'd take forever to shout them all out. I love what they're doing, but I also know that I can't look at their success and compare it to mine. Success comes in different shapes and colors. You have to be able to celebrate yourself and whatever small or big accomplishments that you do, while still appreciating the work of other authors, but put your blinders on and try not to compare yourself. That's my biggest tip.

**GP:** I love that, and I love also what you said about how success is different for each person. It's very easy, I think, to look at the external trappings of someone's success and make assumptions as to what that success really looks like on the inside.

You know, I often talk—I often say it's like pulling a book off of a library or a bookstore bookshelf and comparing your rough draft to that finished product. It's like apples and oranges. There is no way you can compare.

**TC:** No way, none. I'll tell you. Last year at BE, this was like my first signing. I had never done anything like that. And this was like a moment that I had waited for forever. I ran into Jason Reynolds on the street. Of course, I fangirled.

[laughter]

**TC:** My poor husband was right there, but I was like, "Babe, just let me have my moment, okay?" So, I fangirled [laughs] from just running into Jason Reynolds on the street. And here's the thing, this man, I do not know how he does it. He's spitting out books in his sleep, and I had a talk with him about that. I'm like, I think at that point he had had four books coming out like within a year. I'm like, "What? How do you do that?" And can I tell you that he took time out to tell me how he does it, but at the same time, he gave me the best advice, which I think I just kind of repeated to the listeners that really got me focused. I put my blinders on and I said, "You know what? I look up to people like him." His success is incredible. My success will look different, and it's going to be good for me. It's going to be like the right fit for me. I'm really appreciative of that. No, I don't have four books coming out. Well, at the time I didn't. But how ironic is it that when I met him and I asked him that and I'm like, "Wow, you have like four books coming out." Would you believe I now have four books coming out next year?

**GP:** That's amazing.

**TC:** But again, it's not like, oh, I'm trying to live up to whatever standard that Jason Reynolds has set. I just do my own thing. But at the same time, I'm just so appreciative for even getting any type of advice from someone like him, who I find to be super successful. You just take it and you shape your own, and that's what I'm doing.

**GP:** I love it. You know, that's so in the mindset of DIY MFA, right? One of the things that I—one of the sort of cardinal rules, as it were, aside from the fact that there are no rules, is that, there's no such thing as the best practice. People talk about best practices in business and in marketing; in writing, there's no best practice. It's only the thing that works best for you. And the only way to figure that out is to do it, and then test it, and then see if it actually works. And so I love that he gave you the permission to both, understand what he explained, how he did it, but then he gave you permission to do it your own way. You don't have to be a copycat. You can do it your way.

**TC:** Exactly. And you know what? He told me, he brings his writing material everywhere. You would think, "Oh wow, that's such, you know, I knew that," but I guess I didn't know that because when he said it, it meant something different to me. I kid you not, I don't care if I'm going to the doctor's office, you better believe, my laptop is in my purse, so is my journal. Now I keep notes everywhere; on my phone, in my journal. I don't care if I'm sitting in the doctor's office and I'm waiting for 10 minutes. If I can get a paragraph out, that's a paragraph that wouldn't have existed if I didn't have the materials I needed to get the work done. So, there's really no excuse. That's what I learned from him. There is no excuse for me not to get the stories that I want to tell out in the world, even if it's just one paragraph at a time.

**GP:** I so agree with that. My friends used to like rag on me when I was in Grad School, because I used to write on the subway. I'm like, "Well, when else do you think I have time to write?" Like, if you live in New York, you spend most of your time when you're not at work or you're not at school or you're not at home, that time is in the subway or on the bus. It's prime writing time. You're hopefully sitting down, and these days with a phone. I have Scrivener on my phone. I can like be editing my books while—

**TC:** So cool.

**GP:** —on the subway. It's awesome. So, it's been such a blast. I feel like you and I could be jamming for the next two hours, but we both have writing to do, so we need to go and get writing. It's been great to chat with you, Tami. It's such, so much fun.

**TC:** Thanks a lot. I appreciate it.

**GP:** All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.