



Erin Petti

111: Writing Middle Grade Fiction

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. Before we dive on into today's episode, I wanted to remind you that the show notes are over at diymfa.com/111, because it's Episode 111. Today, I am speaking with Erin Petti.

She is the author of the debut novel, *The Peculiar Haunting of Thelma Bee*. Erin lives by the ocean in Massachusetts. And she loves to read about magic and dinosaurs and folklore and ghosts, and kind of all of my favorite things too. And with a Master's in Education and a background in improv comedy, it was no wonder to me that her fiction debut was part magic, part science and completely, totally hilarious. This book is adorable, and I am loving every page. So, thank you, Erin, for being on the show today.

Erin Petti: Gabriela, thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited to be here.

GP: Yay! I am super excited to have you on the show, and especially excited because Middle Grade Fiction is near and dear to my heart. It is my favorite thing to read. It's my favorite thing to write. So, I just love having fellow Middle Grade authors on the show, because it's just-- It's the most fun, I think. [laughs]

EP: Agreed, agreed strongly.

GP: So, let's start off by talking about Thelma Bee, the character, because let's face it; she is amazing. I think I actually was Thelma Bee when I was a kid, except for like the whole being haunted by ghost thing, but her personality, like I could almost see myself in that, which is kind of amazing. So, clearly, this is a character who leaps off the page, but I'm wondering like, where did she come from? Where did Thelma Bee come from as you were writing her?

EP: Hmm. Okay. So, I think it's really awesome and interesting that you say that you can picture yourself as Thelma. Thelma is an unabashed character, we could say that. She is very-- You know, she's uncompromising. She knows that the stuff she thinks is cool is cool. And she's almost like immune to the very sticky web of standard social things that sixth grade girls kind of have to go through.

This was subconscious, but I think, I built her almost as a counterpoint to who I was when I was in sixth grade, [laughs] because I was a terrified person in sixth grade. I was just so super self-conscious, and didn't feel in control of my body or my schedule, or, you know, anything like that. So, I think what I was doing is I was trying to write someone who I really could have used as a friend, maybe, in sixth grade.

I wanted to make her-- You know, she's definitely going to encounter a ton of crazy challenges and obstacles, but I wanted to just kind of break free of the mundane, but really, really sticky stuff that weighs down a lot of girls who were kind of in sixth grade and seventh grade and going through



those changes. So, I kind of gave her this whole backpack full of bravery and just self-confidence that I just wish that every girl had. And, that's kind of the nugget that she grew up from.

GP: I love that. I mean, honestly, what you said about like every girl needs a friend like Thelma Bee, I kind of feel like that too. Like, I kind of needed that friend too, because I remember being in sixth grade and feeling sort of alone in not caring what everyone else thought. You know what I mean? Like, it's also very isolating if you're like the only person who doesn't buy into like the whole clique system, all of a sudden, it gets really lonely.

EP: Absolutely.

GP: It's also interesting to me the fact that you chose sixth grade because that's a little older, I think, than most Middle Grade tends to go; but it's a really crucial year. I feel like it's a weird year for most kids. Like a lot of times, middle grade books will be like fourth, fifth grade; you know, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*, like *Superfudge*.

They're kind of more locked in like late elementary school. And sixth grade is like, like you said, it's a really crazy time to be a kid. Can you talk a little bit about that, sort of why you chose that particular moment in a kid's life to explore through Middle Grade?

EP: Yeah. And I think, you know, that's, for me-- And again, you know, you only have one childhood that you can refer back to yourself, but it really, it feels like the moment for a lot of kids where you still have a lot of the comfort stuff and the world is still intact, you know? Because you grew up as a child with whatever structures you grew up with, and the world feels relatively concrete. And you understand that, you know, things are this way.

And, then I think in sixth grade, for me anyway, it was the first hint that maybe the things that you thought were forever things and the things that you thought were 100%, no questions asked just reality; maybe not all of those things are actually real. And maybe some of the things that you thought forever are actually, are changeable things; and the world is less reliable than you were brought up to believe it would be.

You know, that's the start of puberty, you know? All of a sudden, your body, which you've kind of like, you know, you've always been pretty close with your body; you kind of understand what's going on. All of a sudden, your body starts playing tricks on you.

And you know, things in school happen that, you know, they shouldn't be happening or things in the world are starting to happen that you're kind of getting awareness of that seems like they shouldn't be happening. And you're kind of having to equate the comfort and the stability of being a kid with the discomfort and kind of the cognitive dissonance of encountering a world that is going to change on you without your knowing what to do with that necessarily.

And, the rules don't-- The rules of childhood kind of start not to make 100% sense all the time. Now, in my book, the way that the rules change and the way that the world is different than she imagines it to be is much more fantastical than, you know, a regular sixth grader, who's probably dealing with things that are, you know, much less involved with ghosts and paranormal things. But you know, it's still a moment of self-discovery, a moment of situational awareness. I think, for me, sixth grade kind of falls right at the precipice of that.

GP: I completely agree. I mean, I'm looking back and thinking back to my own like sixth grade experience, I remember that was like in our school, the first year that you went to the different rooms for your class instead to being in a classroom the whole day.



EP: Right. [laughs]

GP: So, it's kind of like this weird, geographical shift within the school world, because all of a sudden, you're the one moving around and going to the different places and you have different teachers for different subjects.

EP: Right.

GP: Whereas in elementary school, it was all, you know, the same; it was like one teacher for all your classes, basically.

EP: Definitely. And I think that, you know, that kind of-- That physical manifestation of that of actually traveling around to classes is, you know, it's kind of, it mirrors everything else that's going on too. I think that, you know, even as--

Because I'm writing a couple more Thelma books and, you know, at the first page of the first book, the way the world exists for her is just tremendously different than say at the, you know, the last page of the second book, where I'm working right now. And you know, just the things that feel concrete, aren't, you know? [laughs] The world is changing.

GP: Absolutely. And that's interesting also because I feel like Thelma tries to impose a certain order on the world, like her very scientific way of dealing with things, even the way she deals with ghosts. Like when she starts taking notes about like the facts about ghosts, according to Eugene; and it's like, she's always trying to impose some sort of order on things that are kind of without order, right?

EP: Right.

GP: So, it's kind of amazing.

EP: And, but, you know, she uses it though. It's like, that's like one of her tools because that's the scientific-- You know, that's the scientific part of her brain. Like if she can write everything down, if she can make concrete observations about things that are happening, you know, it can take her a long bit of the way to understanding things.

But then, as we kind of understand, there are things that, you know, no amount of observation or reasoning is going to really make total sense to you. So, it's kind of that marriage of, what you can make sense of and things that are completely beyond your control.

GP: Absolutely. And that's sort of like the whole process of coming of age, right? Is sort of understanding, that you can't control everything around you and dealing with that weird dichotomy that is being an adult where it's like, you have to try to make sense of things, even though you can't make sense of everything.

EP: Right.

GP: So, one of the things I love, I mean, aside from the school setting and kind of like the moment in Thelma's life, I love the setting of the book. Like, it's very real except for the few things that are supernatural, right? Like, kind of like urban fantasy, but more like in a suburban setting.

EP: A suburban. [laughs]



GP: Yeah, right? Like, a suburban fantasy. It's funny, because that's sort of what I've gravitated towards as well in my own writing back when I was in the MFA program. I was always trying to explain it, like, what do you call that, 'suburban fantasy', 'middle grade'? It's weird.

EP: [laughs] I have a colleague who is actually from Belgium, and he was trying to kind of understand what I was writing. And, he is like, so is like, you know, with Harry Potter and the trains. I was like, okay, so how about this? Kind of like that only instead of a train, it's a used Pontiac.

[laughter]

EP: It's Americanized and very-- It's like a suburban American horror story.

GP: Right.

[laughter]

GP: But it's interesting that this town is very like-- It's a fairly normal town and yet there's a lot of things about Thelma's life even before the ghosts come into play that are kind of peculiar, right? Like her mom's job is a little bit out of the ordinary.

And, you know, the way she looks at the world around her, kind of her like hyper scientific way of living and existing in the world, you know, Thelma, is also very like her. So, can you talk a little bit about sort of the process of crafting this world that is at once very normal, and then also very peculiar and very specific to this character's experience?

EP: Sure. I think really, the Riverfish, Massachusetts, which is the fictional Massachusetts town where this all takes place is really, it's the soul of the story, kind of. It's how I started writing. I was living in a town called Maynard, Massachusetts, which is non-fiction; it's real, in central Massachusetts. We were living in a house that was, the yard abutted a river, the Assabet River.

I'd spent so much time just sitting out by the river because I couldn't believe that I lived in a house that was like literally on a river. It was a quirky mill town, and it just had its own personality. Something about this kind of quirky, working-class town on a river, just, it really was the inspiration for Riverfish.

There's a lot of stuff like the town festival they have is, you know, they have Maynard Fest in Maynard, but you know, in Riverfish they have all of these different festivals; and it's just a sense of community. It's just kind of a wacky little community. And, I was really inspired by that. It kind of just became the backdrop for this whole story. And plus, you know, that's right by where Concord, Massachusetts is.

I was spending a lot of time, you know, on the Battle Road, which are these great trails that are where the Revolutionary War took place; and there's so much history. It just, it feels magical. You know, there's all this history in all of these beautiful woods, and then there's this river. It just kind of came together and became this kind of-- It's like realistic, but there's this 20% weirdness that we wouldn't necessarily find in the real-world.

Even down to, you know, the characters. I'm a big Gilmore Girls fan, so I'm always kind of thinking about Stars Hollow. But you know, it's that kind of, the kind of place that I would really like to live. You know, it's real, but there's a magical, kind of a whimsical quirky quality that exists there too.

GP: Absolutely. And, as someone who went to college in Western Mass, I can totally see pieces of that; like the weird festivals and stuff, like totally.



EP: We love it. We love weird festivals.

GP: I know.

EP: It's ridiculous.

GP: I don't know what it is, but it's like, yeah, it was kind of, yeah, very much part of my college experience. So, you know, it's-- One of the things also that I love is like one of-- So, they always say in writing for Middle Grade, one of like the cliché pieces of advice is you want to get rid of the parents. And, of course, Thelma's mom is pretty much out of the picture. She's on a work trip from the beginning of the book.

And then her dad gets, you know, disposed of pretty quickly or, you know, removed from the story fairly early on. And then, of course, poor Thelma is left to sort of fend for herself and figure out this thing for herself. So, was that a conscious decision on your part to remove the parents from the immediate story? Was that, something that just happened and then the story unleashed from there? Where was that in your thought process?

EP: Well, I have heard that; you know, you want to get rid of the parents. [laughs] It sounds so callous, but you know, what you want to do is just not have the story be about adults. You want it to be about, you know, children that are empowered and not making superficial decisions, but making high-stakes decisions because that's what makes a good Middle Grade story, in my opinion.

I think that, you know, I didn't want to have her be an orphan. I mean, one of the things that I felt very strongly about is that, and this is even before where I knew I really wanted the whole story to go, but I wanted her mother to be somebody who she really idolized, that was not-- Like, mom and dad in this story are not doing a crappy job. They're doing a really good job.

I think that that's something that-- You know, we all kind of come from where we come from. But it's something that felt authentic to me and authentic to this story that like, you know, crazy things can happen. Crummy things can happen, even if your parents are doing a really good job, you know? So, that's, you know-- I didn't want to kill them off or just have them not be there.

I think when I was thinking about stakes and when I was thinking about how it was going to happen, having her father be what's at stake, felt extremely high-stakes for me. And that felt like something that could justify her making the decisions that she comes to make; and, you know, using the strategies that she comes to use. So, not like that's why I, you know, got rid of them, but it's almost like, it came about that they were gone.

I was like, that actually works for me. You know, they're not in the picture right now. So, she is kind of on her own making these decisions. But then again, you know, she lives in this town where it's a very close-knit town. So, she does have to, you know, justify her actions to a few neighbors, and she has to--

You know, it's not like she's totally on her own and she's got a crew with her. But I think that mom being away, made sense to me; and then dad being at stake, was a strong enough driving factor that it could take us through this whole story. It could take us through this whole book.

GP: Absolutely. And, you know, what I love about what you said is this idea that, you know, it has kind of become a cliché in Middle Grade literature where either the kids are orphans or the parents are like super busy, high-powered parents; and they're never around. I kind of love the fact that like



the parents are not around, but it's not, like you said, it's not because they're doing a bad job as parents and because they're neglectful; they're really good parents.

EP: Right. Yeah.

GP: They're not around for like legitimate reasons. Like her mom is on that, you know, mega deer chase in the Appalachians, like, because she's this amazing, she has this incredible job. Her dad is very much there for her, but then he gets, you know, kidnapped by ghosts. So like, that's kind of a bummer, right? Like, there's not a whole lot she could do about that.

So, I love that that turns the cliché on its head, because I do feel like it is important for the kids to have agency in the story for it to not be something that parents swoop in and solve their problems for them. It's important that the kids have that liberty, but it's also kind of becomes so trite to have the parents just like, 'oh, kill off the parents', and then--

EP: Right. You have to do-- I mean, and I think that it's almost like because Henry specifically, her dad, is such a good parent, that's what makes the story move. That's what makes the stakes high. That's what, you know?

GP: Exactly.

EP: I really like-- I don't know if you've read the, *The Luck Uglies* by Paul Durham?

GP: No.

EP: I don't want to give anything away, but I like-- He also, you know, gives his young characters incredible adventures and so much agency; and he never kills the parents either. I really like the way that he kind of maneuvers that too. There's, you know-- It's a creative kind of way to do it. But, you know, I think it-- Again, like with anything, the more Middle Grade I read, the more I see people dealing with this kind of topic in really cool ways.

GP: Absolutely. I think it's become like, especially more recently, people have started finding really creative ways of tackling the idea, because for such a long time, it was either they're orphans or they step into a portal into another world where the parents are not; and therefore, like, that's how you get rid of the parents.

EP: I love those-- I love a lot of those stories too.

GP: Yeah, absolutely. It's just, it's good to see that different angle to it as well. So, another thing that I really find that really worked for me in this novel was the plotting, right? Like a lot of writers struggle with the muddle in the middle, and kind of keeping things moving. But I feel like it's very much like a domino effect, like each chapter, so clearly leads to the next event in the next chapter.

And it's like one thing just, the cause and effect just works so well. So, as a writer, I can't, I imagine that maybe it didn't all come out perfectly like dominoes in a row from the get-go. So, how did you do that? Like, what was your process like to get those pieces to line up so well?

EP: This is, and I might attribute this incorrectly, but I think it's the writers of *South Park* said this, which is kind of like an unlikely place to get really good writing advice necessarily. And I think I read this, or I heard this, when I was in the middle of writing my first draft; instead of saying, you know, in



your book, 'okay, this happens and then this happens, and then this happens', what you need to be able to say is, 'this happens and so this happens and so this happens'.

And that, really was kind of a light bulb for me instead of just, you know, 'it's a series of adventures', you know? It's one ever-unfolding story that that's moving along. Because it's very tempting, you know, for me, like, I threw a lot of stuff into this book that I just really think is awesome and want to write about and just, you know-- I'm not going to give away all the spoilers, but a lot of the elements, I'm like, I just want to, you know, write about all this cool stuff.

And, it would've been very tempting for me to just kind of have just a series of adventures for this young girl. And, it would've been just a different kind of story. And then that advice, that one thing, you can't just have something in there because it's cool. You have to-- You have to really create a world where each thing is leading to the next thing in one way or the other.

That will kind of help the story unfold in a way that does give that kind of cool domino effect, and will allow you to build to a point that's greater and higher stakes and more interesting than you would otherwise.

GP: Did you find yourself outlining? Did you outline at all? Did you-- What did the process look like?

EP: I've tried. I started writing when I was in third grade, and I've been trying to write since third grade. And I got my undergraduate degree in Writing, Literature, and Publishing; and I have always just tried to finish things and had the most terrible time finishing things. And then I wrote an outline, and I finished the book. It was like a light bulb, like 28 years into my life.

It's like unbelievable, that it took me that long to write an outline, but it has changed everything for me. And now, I will not ever try to write a book without an outline ever again. [laughs] It took me a long time to figure it out that that's what I need; that I needed.

GP: So, as you were figuring out this process, like, did you discover that while you were writing *Thelma Bee* or did you discover that before; and then you outlined this book and then, boom, you wrote it?

EP: You know, I don't know why I decided to just like-- I think I had this idea that I would really like to write this kind of book. So, I was reading a lot. I mean, I just love Middle Grade and I love Young Adults; and I was reading a lot. And I was at this point where I was like, 'you know what, I just want to do this. I want to be-- I want to be in this world. I want to write this book and have it become a reality. So, let me just see if I can sketch it out first. And then maybe if I fill in the blanks, I'll actually finish it.'

So, it was really just this process of saying like, you know, 'I'm not just writing a poem or journal entry, like, I really want this to be a Middle Grade book, because that's what I love to read and that's what I want to put out into the world.'

Once I kind of thought about the parameters of that and did some research about like how long they usually are, you know, what kind of elements or comments middle grade; and I kind of wrap my head in a clinical way about what this would be, it just became clear that like, it was going to make my life a lot easier to just outline it out.

But you know, that being said, of course, you know, there were characters that got in the book that I never ever, ever thought I would have to begin with. There were complete different, you know, turns the plot took, but I did need the outline as a grounding force.



And when something did change in the plot as I was writing or in a character, I would just modify the outline and keep going that way. So, even though it was outlined, it was, you know, the first outline-- I have no idea what that would be. The first outline I wrote for this probably bears very little resemblance to what the book looks like.

GP: Yeah. I totally relate to that because I feel very much the same way whenever I write just about anything. I tend to like, I'll write some sort of outline sketch, but then obviously, as it evolves, the outline has to evolve to keep up with the new direction. So, I totally, totally relate to that.

Another thing that really struck me and that I loved about this book and it's something that's been very much on the forefront of my mind, and it's been something that's been talked about. There's been a lot of buzz around this lately; this idea of diversity, and the We Need Diverse Books movement. And what I loved was the way you row diversity into the story without making it a big deal. Like we have Alexander Thelma Bee's best friend; and he's, I think he's Native American, right?

EP: Yeah.

GP: And then Eugene, who is, at least, I think, half-Latino. So, there's an element of like these characters bring diverse experiences to the story, but it's not like a story about diversity, you know what I mean? Like, it didn't feel like that was something that was being hammered on. It was just sort of part of who these characters were.

I really love how you did that. And I was wondering, was this-- Were you thinking intentionally about this? Was it just something that came up like these characters were just that way from their inception? Was this something you had to sort of add to the story as you went? How did that come about?

EP: Sure. It was one of those things where like I-- When I was-- When I was doing, you know, like even just character sketches before, like that's the way that these characters were. I think that if I-- It's very tricky because I'm always so aware of, you know, how wrong I might be getting anything at any given moment. So, you know, I want to present a reflection of the world because that's what I'm writing.

And the world is populated with lots of different kinds of stories and different kinds of folks. So, I didn't want it to be just a story that was about a white person, just because I'm white and all white people, because it wouldn't seem terribly authentic. You know, then by saying that, I'm constantly you know, just if I got anything wrong, I do want people to tell me about it.

I was just trying to present it kind of as a world that has a lot of different voices in it because that's what my world is like, and that's what I wanted to kind of reflect in the story. So, you know, it was one of those things where that's the way the characters were and then I wrote them and then, you know, I started writing it five years ago and I didn't know very much about children's publishing and now that--

You know, I didn't even realize kind of what a hot button issue it was. And now, you know, I'm glad that I have representation in the book. I do, you know, hope to God that I did it the right way. I did research and tried my best. So, you know, I just wanted to provide representation, you know, of a diverse reality, I guess.

GP: Well, I love it because I think it's, you know, there's definitely been a lot of buzz around it. One of the topics that keeps coming up are authors who are not minorities worrying about, 'did I get it right? Or, should I even be writing about these things?' And generally, the sense I've gotten from hearing the discussion and, you know, keeping up with what's the buzz on Social Media, is that that's good.



Like, when non-minority authors are bringing diversity into their books, that's a good thing. And so I think that's important, and obviously, doing your best to make it as authentic and real as you can with research and whatnot. That's obviously, you know, the goal, but I think it's also important that writers notice when white authors are doing that because a lot of writers are scared to, if that makes sense.

EP: Oh yeah. And I totally understand being scared to, and then conversely, I understand how lame it must seem that white authors are scared to do that. I can see it from a number of different perspectives. You know, I can only kind of speak for my own experience with, you know, just trying to present these characters the way that I imagined them. I guess, the only thing that you can do-- This is like my Pep Talk to myself.

In my position, I created these characters with a lot of love and I'm putting them in the world. You know, if I got something wrong, I want to know about it. I would just always try to do better the next time. I think that's, you know, in general, as a writer, no matter what the topic is, kind of a writer's responsibility to just put that out into the world, you know?

All you can do is your best. And if you're wrong, you got to just kind of take criticism and just try to make it right the next time, you know? As humans, that's all we can do. I guess, that's where I'm coming from at this moment. [laughs]

GP: I love that. I love that. I really hope a lot of authors listen to this episode because I think; (A) it's an important conversation to be having, right? Like, I think it's one of the things that We Need Diverse Books has been driving for is just having conversations on this topic and people discussing it and expressing when they're afraid or not afraid, or 'are we going to get this right? Or should I-- Am I appropriating something if I write about it?'

But these are-- Like, these are necessary conversations to be having. And then to come back to that idea of love, right? And that as authors, if we're writing out of love and it's coming from a place of love, then you do your best and that's the most you can do.

EP: I mean, really it's that, the hope is that, you know, all different kinds of kids can see themselves in the book. It's not just a girl book or a boy book, or, you know, any kind-- My hope and my vision for the book is that it's a really fun, scary adventure; and it has a lot to do with love and loyalty and friendship. I think that a lot of different readers might enjoy it. I just hope that, you know, different kinds of readers can see themselves in my characters.

GP: Well, I have a feeling that they will, because I definitely saw myself in the book--

EP: That's good.

GP: -in a very obvious way. Another thing that you brought that you just mentioned that I think is interesting is the fact that it really is a scary book, right? Like some of those illustrations in there, like on one hand, it's so quirky. At first, I find myself reading it and I'm like, 'oh little man', that's my four-year-old, 'he would love to read this book'. And then, I turn the page and it's this scary ghost picture. And I'm like, 'okay, not showing that to my four-year-old, he's going to have nightmares for a week'. Like, it's a scary book, right?

EP: Yeah. It's like really fun. I mean, I didn't know it was going to be as scary. [laughs] I truly didn't. I mean, because so much of it, like really, I'm writing from this place of like, you know, I love, you know, the town and the woods and the history; and I'm like writing about it. And then, you know-- And



then after the fact, like someone said to me the other day, and I won't mention the thing, but there's something that's pretty scary that happens at the end.

The way they articulated to me, I was like, 'oh my god, that is scary'. Like, I don't think I realized that it was going to-- You know, it's being-- You know, it's released right around Halloween and, you know, the more I saw the art for it, I was like, 'boy, I think I wrote like, a beginner's horror novel here by mistake', but, you know, it's fun. It's turned out to be something that's kind of cool and creepy.

GP: I think that adds to like, sort of the adventure of the book as well, and obviously adds to the stakes, right? Like the scarier, it is the higher, the stakes are. So, that's--

EP: And the illustrator, Kris Aro McLeod, she's done such an amazing job. I saw, you know, the finished copies. So, we have our early copies and then, you know, it comes out in bookstores and the finished hardback in some of the illustrations in there, I was like, 'oh my goodness'. [laughs] She really, like, I didn't realize how scary that scene was until I just saw her illustration. [laughs] That's some scary stuff.

GP: In general, just the, like, overall design is gorgeous. I mean, the PDF version that I've been perusing, with all of the drawings, like in the margins; it's just really, it kind of creates a whole experience for the book too, which I think is kind of fun.

EP: Awesome. I can't even tell you how-- I just had no expectation, you know? I was very, very happy when my agent sold Thelma to Mighty Media Press because they put out great books. And then they've just really gone the extra mile with Thelma Bee. I mean, the care and the love that they've put into the design and the packaging, it's just like so surpassed my expectations of how beautiful it would be. I can't even tell you how thrilled I am.

GP: Love it, and that actually segues really well into what I was going to ask you next, which is sort of the debut author process, because this is your first book; so writing and publishing are kind of new. So, can you tell us a little bit about, like, what was the most fun thing that happened throughout this process?

EP: The most fun thing. I mean, one of the-- One of the craziest things, and this was like pretty early on, they sent me like the portfolios of three or four different artists for my feedback. And I'm looking at these amazing portfolios of these illustrators and thinking like, 'are you kidding, [laughs] we get to work with one of these people?' Like I wrote a book, but like, these people are really talented, you know?

And there was just, you know, the kind of moments when you're like, 'I'm not alone. You know, I'm on a team and this team is wildly talented.' It's just been such a different experience than like when you're querying, and just kind of writing to agents or, you know, any step along the way that's just tremendously lonely.

And then all of a sudden, there's a bunch of people who really get my characters and really are excited about the story. So, you know, anytime I talk to the publishing team, it's like a dream come true; so exciting.

GP: What was the biggest hurdle or challenge for you?

EP: You know, it really hasn't-- I don't want to say-- [laughs] Writing the book was hard and the revisions were hard, but every single time I got a set of notes, like from my editor; man, she's just so smart. And she made the book so much better that even though I would be looking at a set of edits and being like, 'okay, you know, we're going to have to figure out how I'm going to schedule all this writing time'.



You know, because it's like heavy-duty changes and everything. And that's like the one hand, the other hand is like, I, for sure see how this is going to make this book 1000% better. So, you know, since kind of like we got the book deal and we've been working with Mighty Media, there hasn't been like any bad part of it so far. I'm like knocking on the wood in my house right now. But it's just because even the hard work has been in service of like making this lifelong dream come true for me. So, I really don't mind doing it.

GP: It's funny too, because I had such a similar experience with the DIY MFA book and working with my own editor. Like, when you know that like the comments and the notes are coming from sort of a place of improving the work, then it's like you don't have to fight over it almost. It's like-- It's more like, 'how do I make this work?' Not, 'oh no, I have to change something.' You know?

EP: Exactly.

GP: And, it's still hard work, but it's like, fun hard work.

EP: Totally. I mean, it's in service of your own-- I mean, so many of us, you know, myself included, we work for other people. You know, we turn 14, we start working jobs, and we work for other people. And then all of a sudden, everyone's working on your project. Like, it's just such a crazy shift, and it's so empowering and so exciting to do that hard work.

GP: I love that. I mean, it sort of ties to my last question about the sort of debut author process, was what surprised you the most? But it sounds like that might have been a surprise, right? Like, sort of this perception shift.

EP: Totally. And, you know, this was such a good fit for me. You know, Mighty Media Press, it's pretty small. It has, you know, a couple of titles that they really love and they care about and they put out in the world. I think like for my particularly anxious and needy personality, it was just such a lovely fit because it's not like there's a million authors and someone will get around to emailing me back when they can. They've really just taken so much care with the process and so much care with the book that I feel like I just lucked out like crazy.

GP: I love that. I think that really underscores the thing that's so important that a lot of writers lose sight of sometimes, especially when we're in the query process or when we're on submission and kind of just crossing our fingers and waiting and hoping that our agent can place the book somewhere that we sometimes forget that it's about the fit, right? It's about finding the right match for you as the author or your book and not so much about finding any possible option.

EP: I mean, and it's just like, for me, like it's been just a series of like, I really thought; I mean, I love my story, I love my characters, I love my book; but I had no expectation ever of anyone doing as much work for it as these people have done. Like, I thought like, you know, it's going to be like a fun paperback and, you know, we'll, you know, maybe do a couple of them or whatever.

And the fact that, you know, the internal illustrations and all of the care that they put behind it; I'm like, I knew I loved my book, I knew it was good; but I think these people, like, they thought it could be more than I even thought. And, that has been just such a lovely experience.

GP: I love that. That makes me so happy to hear it. So, you mentioned earlier that you have a few projects, a couple of Thelma Bee books. So, what do you have coming up next? Can you tell us a little bit about it?



EP: I can tell you, so nothing is concrete, but I can say that I have, at least, two more Thelma Bee stories that are in her arc that are in heavy, being worked on heavily. You know, and again, I have nothing concrete or in stone yet. But they're in existence. I'm working on them. And the second one really widens the scale of Thelma's troubles even larger, and kind of, deals with some new characters that bring new dynamics and new dangers into her life.

GP: So, even wider than her dad getting kidnapped by ghosts? [laughs]

EP: Yeah. Things get, you know, physically and emotionally a lot bigger in the second one. [laughs]

GP: Wow. Well, I cannot wait to hear more about it when you have news to share.

EP: Thank you. I will share. [laughs]

GP: So, I always end each interview with the same question. What is your number one tip for writers?

EP: So, my number one tip for writers, because I would've considered myself a person who writes, like I said, from like third grade on, I really just wanted to do it and it felt good to do it, even though I didn't really know what I was going to end up writing. It just felt good to write for a really long time. But I think that my number one tip for writers is; just do it.

Just the thing that-- The thing that feels like a stupid dream to pursue is only not happening because you're not doing it. And, you don't have to know how to write a book to start writing a book. I certainly had no idea how to write a book. You need to read a bunch of books. So, I was reading and I loved writing, and that's enough.

You can start from there and that can be enough to start your book. And if I hadn't done it the day that I did it, maybe I wouldn't have done it at all. It's changed my life; and it's made me, you know, explore a whole beautiful, the whole beautiful world of children's publishing, which I knew very little about. And, I learned about it as I was going.

You don't need to know how to do something to start doing it. So, if you've got a crazy idea or a crazy dream just, you know, after you log off from this brilliant podcast, which you should completely listen to until the very end; but after that's all done, open up your notebook or your laptop and just start. That would be my number one piece of advice.

GP: I completely agree. And, that idea of constantly waiting until we're ready; I mean, if I had done that, DIY MFA would not exist, right? Like, none of this would ever have happened, but I had this crazy idea and I blogged about it on my teeny-tiny blog with only 12 followers; one of whom was my mother.

EP: [laughs] Oh, mom.

GP: I know, right? Moms are the best

EP: They are.

GP: And, you know, that's where it grew out to this. And, you wrote this book, Thelma Bee, which has now grown out to this awesome book that's out right now. And so that is really cool. So, it's a testament to this idea that we don't need someone else's permission to say, "You're ready start doing it". We just have to do it.



EP: That's exactly it. You know, it's something like my dad, he would say when I was growing up that, 'Nike had it right'. He's like, 'I hate saying that because it sounds stupid, but just do it. You know, if you want do something, just do it.' It's applicable across the board, and just do it.

GP: Absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Erin, for being on the show today. This was a blast chatting with you. I feel like we could have geeked out over children's literature for like another hour or so.

EP: Definitely. [laughs] Thank you so much for having me. It was an absolute pleasure.

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

