diyMFA *Carolyn Crimi and Corinna Luyken*

283: Art, Magic, and Robots

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/283 because it's Episode 283. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, or you know, all the usual places where you can listen to podcasts, and leave us a review. This will help other word nerds discover the show as well.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Carolyn Crimi and Corinna Luyken, the author and illustrator team behind the buzz-worthy Middle Grade novel Weird Little Robots. Carolyn Crimi is the author of several books for children, including Where's My Mummy?, Henry and the Buccaneer Bunnies, Henry and the Crazed Chicken Pirates. This Henry dude has a lot of interesting friends, apparently; and there may be lobsters. Weird Little Robots is her first novel, and she lives in Illinois.

Corinna Luyken is the author-illustrator of the New York Times Bestseller, My Heart; as well as The Book of Mistakes, which received four-starred reviews and has been praised by Entertainment Weekly, the Wall Street Journal, NPR, and more.

She's the illustrator on Weird Little Robots, which is written by Carolyn; and also the illustrator on Adrian Simcox Does Not Have a Horse, which is written by Marcy Campbell. She lives in Olympia, Washington with her husband, daughter, and two cats. Welcome Carolyn and Corinna. It is so great to have you here.

Carolyn Crimi: Thank you.

Corinna Luyken: Thank you. It's great to be here. Thank you for having us.

GP: So, I am so, so excited about Weird Little Robots. I've been reading it and just devouring this story. It's so charming. And, I always like to start by hearing about the story behind the story. So, can you guys tell me-- So Carolyn, maybe if you could start, tell us what inspired you to write Weird Little Robots in the first place, and why; and then Corinna, I'd love to hear what drew you to the project.

CC: Sure, no, I wrote it many, many years ago, probably in 2012 or so, but I have dim memories of how I got the idea. I remember seeing a picture of a little tiny hand-made robot on somebody's Facebook page, and I am a lover of all things miniature. And I also, it reminded me of these weird toys that I had when I was little called Zeroids. They were these plastic toys.

I used to watch the commercials and I would picture myself having these robots, and they could move around on their own. And I thought, 'wow, they'd be like little pets'. And then when I actually got these robots as a gift, they just broke within hours. I got two of these little plastic robots and they broke, and all of that came rushing back to me when I saw that weird little robot on the Facebook page.

But I think what I really wanted, I was a lonely girl, youngest of five; no one was playing with me. I think I wanted, you know, a playmate. So, that kind of started me thinking about what would happen if a girl created her own little robots and they did come to life.

GP: Hmm. What about you Corinna? What drew you to this project?

CL: Well, there were a number of things that I really loved about this story when I read it. I think, you know, I have a daughter who just turned 10 last week. For one thing, it's just, you know, my daughter and her friends are right in this age range. And so I thought it would be really fun to make a book that would speak to them right now. My mother was a scientist. She was a botanist.

And so as a kid, I loved art, but I also loved math and I loved science. I was really excited to make a book that had a couple of girls who are creative and inventors, and that art and science and with the bird houses. And that sounded like it would be so much fun to draw these robots, and these bird houses, and these girls.

And so that's probably what drew me in initially. And then there's the layers of friendship story that are also there, are wonderful and meaningful and added another dimension to my excitement about illustrating it.

GP: So Carolyn, for you, this is your first novel, although you mentioned like this is sort of been simmering in your mind for some time, but it's definitely a shift going from picture-books to writing a Middle Grade novel. Can you talk a little bit about that shift in just the writing itself?

CC: Yeah. Well, I turned 50 in 2010, and I decided that I needed to branch out. I had really always been writing novels for kids, always, always; but I wouldn't finish them and or I would get to a certain point and then I just wouldn't revise. And, I realized that I was just afraid. I was afraid of putting in so much work for something that may never get published. And, I just decided, 'forget that, you know, I'm going to just go all out and create something that--'

I just always wanted to write novels for kids, but I was too afraid, basically. And I had had success as a children's picture-book author, but this was something new. I decided, 'Hey, I'm 50. I might as well try something new.' And I just kind of dove in, and I wrote actually 80 pages of a rough draft that I completely threw out--

GP: Wow.

CC: -and started all over again. Yeah. After getting some very wise advice from my friend, Laura Ruby, after she read the first 80 pages, she said, "I understand why you're stuck, because your character doesn't really want anything."

GP: Ha. [laughs]

CC: "Your character kind of has to want something in a book." So, I had to start over again, but I'm really glad I did. And, I'm glad I put the time and effort into it.

GP: So, I mean, you tap into so many things just in that, in what you just said. One of them is this idea of like sustaining that creative momentum throughout working on a longer project. And Corinna, I'm guessing that there's also like maintaining creative momentum on the illustration side as well. Can you talk a little bit about like, what are some of the stumbling blocks as an illustrator that you run into and that you need to kind of build momentum in order to get through?

CL: Well, I think for an illustrator as, you know, when you're illustrating and you have not written the text, there's something simpler in some ways, because half the work has already been done and the world has been created to some degree and you're not starting from zero, from a blank page. But in terms of how you envision the world and how it's going to be transferred to paper, in some ways you are still starting from the very beginning.

And so it really ends up being broken up into these sort of chunks of, you know, early character sketches and experimentation. For me, I do a tremendous amount of experimenting to try to figure out what a world is even going to look like. And so I know for some people, different people enjoy, I think, different parts of the process more. And for me, that early part of the process is one of the most fun parts.

I don't really know what I'm doing and it's a little comfortable, but it's also really fun. You know, 'am I going to use ink? Am I going to use watercolor or pencils? Or how is this going to look?' And for me, this was my first time doing a book in just black and white. And so that was new. And that was something that I had to experiment quite a bit with to figure out how I was going to make it all work.

If you end up with too many grades in the middle, it doesn't transfer well in the final book, really have more contrast. So, there's a learning curve for me there, but it was definitely something that I was very excited to learn. It was something I wanted to do. So, that was an exciting opportunity. And then, you know, from there, sort of that sustaining a longer thing, you have to do initial sketches and then there's a lot more feedback.

I think, you know, when you have a longer story, there's a lot more room as an illustrator to forget something, or make a mistake, or have something not look the same from page to page or, you know, you forget something. So, there's fact-checkers at Candlewick who are actually going through and reading and checking. So, there's a lot more involvement in that way, early on with the sketches before going to final art.

So, the whole process was a little different for me in that way. And, in fact, there are things that happen. Thank goodness for fact-checkers, because there's things like, 'she's supposed to have a tool belt on when she's running on this page', and I can't believe, you know, I left out the tool belt; or 'wait a minute, the door opened in, we should be seeing the door right now and we don't', and that kind of thing.

So, in that way, it's a little different from the writer's process work; Carolyn is really, she's creating everything out of nothing. And, I had a lot to work with to begin with. So, it's a different kind of sustaining, you know, but there is still this long process that you sort of are moving through where you don't really know where you're going in the beginning. And then when you get to the end, things start to become much clearer.

GP: Yeah. And you know, but you mentioned about, like, the fact-checking. I mean, it's almost like continuity issues that you see in like films, right? Like, 'you need to make sure that, you know, Indiana Jones has his hat when he's supposed to', and things like that.

So yeah, I could totally see that, but it's one of those things that like, as a reader, we just take for granted. It's one of those things where the readers, like, if they notice it, then that probably means there was a problem. If they don't notice it, it's because everything was smooth-sailing. So, that's-- Yeah, that's challenging.

CL: Exactly. And with a picture-book because there's fewer pages and they're all linked, there's not gaps of words between them, you know, like they all have pictures; I think it's easier as an illustrator

in some ways to track and make sure you're not making mistakes. But when you have a much longer period of time, you know, each chapter has images and there's a lot more happening over the course of the novel; there's more opportunity to be inconsistent. Let's put it that way.

[laughter]

CL: So, thank goodness for those fact-checkers. And, kids are so observant, they will notice. They absolutely will notice if you get it wrong.

GP: So Carolyn, I mean, as someone who is the orchestrator of the entire world, that is this book, there's a tremendous amount of trust that goes into handing that world to an illustrator to then kind of make it come to life in the pictures. What did you have to think about, like as you were writing, were you imagining illustrations to go with certain areas? Did you do any legwork on your side to communicate things so that Corinna would have what she needed to work with?

CC: Actually, not as much as with a picture-book; with a picture-book, I was very much thinking about areas that I wouldn't have to write about because the illustrator can do the illustrations and fill that in. But when I'm writing the whole thing, I can't leave parts out and let the illustrator do that. It's a whole different writing process for me. For instance, like picture-book, there's a page turn and you can get to a whole new scene.

Whereas when I'm writing a novel, I often need to have that character walk from the door to the car so that because of my reader. I didn't know where the illustrations would be. With picture-books, I was just much more familiar with the process of writing for an illustrator and what to leave out; leave out plot color, like doesn't matter, unless it's really important to the plot, leave all that stuff to the illustrator.

I feel like they have a lot more freedom with a picture-book than they do with the Middle Grade novel; plus, there's color. So, it's just, I really didn't think of the illustration. I didn't know if it would even get published; this book, while I was writing it. So, and I did not think of the illustrator nearly as much as I do when I'm writing picture-books, then I have to be aware of where I can leave words out and they can take control. Is that clear?

GP: No, that makes total, total sense. So, you said something earlier, Carolyn, about sort of how the character, you know, this character who wanted a friend and all of that; and sort of the loneliness factor, and that idea of the layered friendships. So, I wanted to turn our attention to the central friendship and the story, Penny Rose and Lark.

I mean, these two kids, like, I remember when I started to reading this book, I was like, "I want to be Penny Rose's best friend." Like, she's just such a kid that I would want to hang out with. So, I'd love to hear the author and illustrator side of building these characters. How did you make these characters feel so alive and so real?

CC: Well, I'm so glad to they do.

[laughter]

CC: Yay! Thank you. You know, I just do so many drafts; and I take advice from a member of my writers' group, who just says, to add in things that you love and see where that takes you. And so it's sort of like a Crimi soup. So the kinds of things that I love-- When I was little, I made little villages out of boxes and things for my toy mice.

And that came out in the book because that was something I love to do, and I love to see on Etsy all the beautiful little things that people do. So miniature is very much something love. And, maybe that love comes through in this character, but I had to work on her. I had to work on her draft after draft after draft, adding things to her personality; her notebooks that she had, those came in a later draft.

I think her problems that she's having with her friendship-- There really was no friendship in that first 80 pages that I discarded. She was friends with an 80-year-old woman who lived next door and that just wasn't going to work. So, it's just a question of drafting and adding and chiseling this character out of nothing really.

GP: I mean, even the names of the character seem to capture their personality, right? Like Penny Rose has like that kind of, like, on one hand, shiny penny; but then rose is sort of delicate. She's so full of contradictions as a character. Like, she's both artistic, but also sciencey. And then, of course, Lark; like that just-- It just fits her personality so much and the whole bird thing. So, I love how everything about these characters really makes them come alive.

CC: I very much collect names. I'm very, very into names. Names are a big thing of mine. And a friend of a friend, has a good friend; friend of a friend of a friend--

[laughter]

CC: has a friend named Penny Rose, and as soon as I heard that name, I just loved the lyricism of it. I thought, 'oh, that's a beautiful name for my character'. So I just, I hold it. I keep it, like, keep it in my little idea box in my head. And the name Lark, when I was, I knew that my main character would love birds. And I thought, well, Lark is the perfect name for a character who loves birds. She might grow to love birds because her name is Lark. So, I just, am always, I Google unusual girls' names all the time.

[laughter]

CC: But rose was a gift. That was a gift. When I heard that name, I loved it. And Lark was just something I just sort of thought of birds, and I thought Lark would make a great name.

CL: Well, I have to say, I love those names too. I think they're such great names. And my daughter's middle name is actually Meadowlark. And so I actually, I was like, 'Lark, that is such a great name. Maybe we shouldn't use that.'

[laughter]

CL: I love it.

GP: So Corinna, can you talk a little bit about taking the characters from the words that you got from Carolyn to like actually creating the drawings of them?

CL: Well, so for me, I think, you know, the character design is one of the most fun parts. I mean, I love drawing people; and I love sort of having a character speak to me, I guess, and emerge. And so that process for me has to do with quite a bit of drawing. I kind of will draw them over and over and over until they start to look right. I don't know how to explain it exactly, but it's almost like they are already there and they're speaking to you; and they're kind of letting you know, like, 'yep, this is me'.

And you'll think you kind of almost have the character and then you draw them a few more times, and realize something isn't quite right. And eventually, just by redrawing, primarily their faces actually,

I kind of start to, they just start to be who they are. I almost feel like to some degree, it's not me deciding. It's more like me uncovering and being curious and then paying attention as I draw and sort of finding the, you know, the visual voice of the character. That process is really fun.

And then there's, you know, little details that are there in the text, like Lark's glasses, which I was like, 'those are going to be so fun to draw', and those kinds of details, but it really is sort of an uncovering in a way. Even though I'm drawing, I'm adding to the paper; I feel in many ways, like I'm actually digging in and uncovering something until I finally figure out what the character ought to look like, if makes sense.

GP: It makes total sense. And the whole idea of the sort of repeating and drawing again and again, you know what it reminds me of? Some years ago, I was in London at, I think it was a Tate gallery; and they had a Degas exhibit, but it wasn't like a regular exhibit. It was all of his lost sketches or like his random sketches that they had uncovered.

One of the things that was so cool about it is that you'd see the final, you know, fancy painting of the ballerinas or something, but then you'd see all of the pastel sketches that he would do over and over. And he'd sketch the exact same pose, the exact same character again and again.

And he'd just like layer on top of layer with this like thin paper. And it was kind of like what you were talking about, like how eventually the character would start to look like itself. It's really kind of cool. There's almost something about like the muscle memory, having to learn what the character looks like.

CL: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. It is a really fun process. And, for me, I actually-- I love seeing artists' sketches. I mean, I absolutely love that. It's one of my favorite things. I feel like, you know, you can see their mind, their mind, their imagination, their heart in many ways at work when you see those sketches and those early lines; and especially, when there are repeated layers of lines.

It's part of why when I draw, I like to have some of those still peeking out or still visible. You know, even if I go over something in ink, I like to have bits of pencil that you can sort of see or the smudges; and it feels like the memory of the drawing or the history of the drawing or how the drawing came to be. And you get little peaks of that or little glimpses of that.

For me, when I see that in other artists' work, it's always really exciting. It's sort of like talking to a writer about, you know, their process and how they got there. But as an artist, I can see it on paper. I'm like, 'that's where they started. I look at that arm line was actually not quite in the right place or that leg line, but when they fixed it, and they added another layer and then another layer; now, accidentally, they have this smudginess that makes it look like there's motion or there's depth or something else interesting going on.'

I find that the way those layers add up is exciting and also can be surprising. And I think, you know, there's ways with writing and art both to surprise yourself. And for me, that's really fun how the process is, when I'm a little bit surprised. And I think something about leaving that history of the drawing lines behind, you're increasing your possibility of surprising yourself in a wonderful way.

GP: Yeah. You know, it's interesting too, because in writing, we don't have that as much. Like when we edit things, it's kind of, it's edited.

CL: It's gone. It's not like you save all those drafts, right?

[laughter]

GP: Exactly. And it's not like the readers get to see those drafts. So, that's so fascinating that like, in art, like in drawing, you can leave those little in there; but in writing, it's a lot harder to do that, if possible at all. So, one of the things I wanted to shift and talk about was kind of the interplay; and we've already sort of touched on this, the interplay between art and science, because there's a lot of both in this book.

On one hand, we've got the robots and there's something very like, you know, sciencey about them. And, Penny Rose wants to be part of the science society and all that stuff. On the other hand, you've got like Lark, and the bird houses, and this amazing robot town. There's something very artsy about how Penny Rose approaches building the robots as well as sciencey.

So, a lot of times people don't think of art and sciences going together. Although I kind of feel like the two things go hand-in-hand, but I wanted to talk a little bit about the interplay between those things, both in the story itself and also in the way the illustrations played out.

CC: Yeah. It was a fun thing to play with in the manuscript. It was something that I; again, that I added in and I toyed with and I teased. So, that was definitely a big theme of mine was just, I feel like art is science, and science is art.

GP: Yeah.

CC: Magic; and science is magic. And I really wanted to kind of highlight that in this book. For instance, there's sub-plot of Lark and she receives gifts from crows. They drop little weird things in her yard; little weird, nuts and bolts and things like that, or shells. And that, that story came from a real little girl who left bread crumbs for crows, and they started giving her gifts.

And I thought, 'that is magic. That is complete magic.' And, it is also science. So, magic and science and art, I think just played beautifully together. The funny thing about that incident in the book, where Lark receives all these gifts; and at first, Penny Rose doesn't believe her. She just thinks that Lark might be imagining it or making it up. But then she sees this thing on the news about the little girl who this happened to. So, I wrote that scene.

I wrote it probably in 2013; I don't know, 2013, 13, something like that. A book came out this year by Anne Ursu who is fabulous, wonderful author, middle grade author. In the book, a girl named Lark has crows delivering little trinkets to her. So, we were both getting the same story, both put it in our books; that's kind of magically weird. [laughs]

GP: Yeah.

CL: That's amazing.

CC: So, especially I was like, 'Anne Ursu and I, I had the same idea. Wow.' I really have a lot of admiration for her, but I can't find the quote. I was looking for the quote by Albert Einstein, but it's something about, 'you can either believe that nothing is a miracle or everything is', and I am totally a person who believes that everything is a miracle, and it's all very magical; and science is magical, and magic is science.

GP: You know, it's interesting too, because if you think about it historically, like if we go back 100 years or 200 years and we share science of today, people from 200 years ago would think it was magic. Like, 'people go into space? That's magic.' Like, 'what is this witchery of like little devices that

you hold in your hand and you're talking to a human being on the other side of the planet?' And yet for us, this is obviously science, but it, yeah, like, the line totally blurs.

CC: Yes, absolutely. And the idea that you're either an artist or a scientist, I don't believe in that at all. You know, there can be both. And, I wanted her to be both. I wanted both characters to be both.

GP: It's interesting too. I mean, thinking historically, a lot of the artists that we think of like Leonardo Da Vinci was both an artist, but also a scientist. I think it's true in a lot of, even today. But it's interesting that our schools often put them into different buckets. Like my kids' school has just recently started incorporating art into their STEM program. So, they have a STEAM program now. I think that's just so cool because it means that like they're integrating the artistic side of things and the creativity also with all of this, you know, more techy, math, science-oriented stuff,

CC: You need them all.

GP: I know.

CC: You need to nurture and all of those qualities within yourself. So, I love the whole STEAM, the STEAM ideals. I think that's completely where I'm at. Like, let's get the art in there too.

GP: Yeah. Speaking of which, with the illustrations, Corinna, can you talk a little bit-- I mean, I noticed right away that there's a softness to the illustrations. It could have been very high techy and it isn't. So, clearly that's a deliberate choice to give it that softer, more artsy feel. Can you talk a little bit about sort of how the illustrations capture this dichotomy between, or, you know, integrate the scienciness, and also the magic and the art?

CL: Yeah. Well, you know, I really wanted it because these robots and these bird houses are these objects that are tied into both science and art, but are ultimately made by hand by these girls. They make them with their own hands. And so I really felt like it was important that the art for the book have a feeling and a look of being hand-made.

You think about Penny Rose's journals, and you think about like the lamp in her bedroom was really fun to draw and make up. And just this-- You know, I imagine this girl who makes these robots is not going to stop there. You know, I have a daughter who's very creative and artistic, but likes to tinker and do science, love science as well; and is always making things up and inventing things and creating things.

And you know, you don't just make one thing, the robots, when that's your impulse; you know, your life and your room and your world tend to contain many things probably that are hand-made, is the way I was thinking about it for both these girls.

And so, you know, whether-- It was interesting to something Carolyn said earlier about filling the book with things that she loves. I think that's wonderful advice. And I think that's something that when I get stuck, I come back to as well is, you know, 'what should I put in this scene?' It's like, 'well, what's something I love that this character might love too?'

And so you get fun, little details, like, I'm thinking about this page; where she is in her room, on her bed and she's got the lamp and her journal. She's got a little mug that I, you know, was thinking, what kind of pattern would she have on this mug? Would it, you know-- I put kind of like a vine botanical kind of pattern on it.

And she's got a poster on her wall of like, you know, the science part of how a wheel is put together; but when you look at engineering drawings or you look at architectural drawings or you look at, again like these older artists from long ago, who were scientists at the same time, you know, all of that stuff is beautiful. It's art.

When you take apart, when you look closely at any diagram for how something is built, I mean, even the diagram can have this really beautiful, lovely feel to it. And so for me, like Carolyn, the interplay between science and art is quite fluid and sort of fundamental. I don't know that obvious is necessarily the right word, but it's so clear to me that they're both necessary and that they inhabit a shared universe, where, you know, rarely--

I mean, you don't have science without some art as well. You have to be able to draw up certain kinds of diagrams and forms before you create them. And, then artists are constantly being inspired by nature and science. And so for me, the interplay between those two is a really interesting place to be and hang out in. It's part of why I was excited to live in this world of this book for a while. So, that influenced the design; back to that design question of the hand-made feeling of the book and the softness of the book, for sure.

GP: So, there's so much in what both of you said that we need to unpack, but one of the things I wanted to mention, so in a past life, I was a toy designer. And, way back in the day when I was in grad school, one of, and this is all about-- I share the story to show sort of that interplay between art and science.

One of the assignments we had in a particular design class was we had to come up with ways of connecting to rods, a rod in a plane or two planes without using glue or nails. So, we had to try to figure out ways of making those intersections, such that we wouldn't, that like it would hold together and bear weight without having to like, you know, glue it and use sort of a artificial connection. It was amazing how--

This was like a weekend homework assignment, and like the wealth of imagination and possibilities that came in on Monday in that studio, when everyone was bringing in their different solutions to that problem, it was really, really cool.

So, you know, it's one of those things sometimes that like, we think of art and science as being distinct things, but there's problem-solving in both. And often, it's that problem-solving piece that is why people who are into science are also often have like artistic minds and vice versa because that problem-solving piece kind of goes across the board.

CL: Absolutely. And, I always tell people, you know, when people talk about it-- I mean, I love that STEAM thing you're were talking about earlier as well, and bringing art in with the science and technology and math. But, you know, when I go into classrooms and I do art activities with kids, it's like not every child needs to be a drawer. But everybody can benefit from creative problem-solving and creative thinking.

And the arts are so powerful for helping make those creative connections in the brain and so clearly beneficial to scientists, and to engineers, and to all these other-- I mean, any person in this world, no matter what your job is, you're going to benefit from creative problem-solving. And, I love that idea of all those people coming into the classroom with all those different solutions to that, to the wheels and planes. Yeah.

GP: Yeah. Like people drilling holes and things and seeing how they could connect and interlock; it was really cool. It was so much fun. The other thing I wanted to also highlight, like what you were

saying about the hand-made element. I mean, in some ways, if we step back and we give it kind of a meta approach, it's almost like we, as the reader are reading one of Penny Rose's journals.

Like, it gives us that feeling of like, the story almost becomes like a journal or something like that with all the drawings in it, because of that hand-made feeling to it. So, I thought that meta element was also really cool.

CL: That's a neat way of thinking about it. I love thinking about her in those journals. That was such a neat detail that Carolyn put in there. And, it's neat to hear that that wasn't there right away, Carolyn, and that, that came later.

CC: Yeah. Absolutely, came later. But something else that you need to know is that I was presented with a few illustrators, but when I saw old the book and they said, "Who would you like?" And I was like, "Oh, well, it's actually no question, this woman."

[laughter]

CC: Because of that hand-made sort of element to it, because the others, robots, that, you know, they showed me-- The Candlewick people showed me a lot of robots that were hard-looking and didn't have the whimsy. I feel like I was looking for something whimsical. And so there was no question. So, I think that hand-made quality is what I love so much about the art.

GP: I love that you mentioned the robots too, because they have such a personality; and yet, not all of them talk. I think there's one; iPam, who texts, but the other ones it's like, it's purely body language that we get in order to see what it is that they're, you know, communicating; and then iPam communicates to Penny Rose.

So, how did you bring them to life and make them feel like in-- I mean, they're almost human in some ways. So, how did you do that? And, they have like such personalities. And yet, we only get a little nugget from them.

CC: They were hands-down the most fun to write in the whole book. Their scenes were so much fun to write and to think of what they might want. Of course, they want a pet.

GP: Of course.

[laughter]

CC: Everybody wants a pet. So, I loved writing about them. So again, I'm going to go back to those 80 pages that I tossed out. In those 80 pages, I had these little short chapters; I wouldn't even call them a chapter. They were just a page, but they were the robots talking to each other. And so I really got to know the robots in that draft. It was all from their point of view.

I think it probably took you out of the story a little too much, but I had fun writing them; and I got to know the robots that way. So, that draft was really my pre-write exercise. That's how I do it. Sort of, I don't really outline and do all the, 'what does your character want for breakfast', type of work beforehand. I just jump in and then I toss it, and then I jump in again and I toss things, and I keep jumping in and tossing things out. But I did get to know them a lot through those little short chapters that I wrote in that first draft.

GP: You know, I'm so glad you shared that because I think a lot of writers; and I'm guessing a lot of listeners for this episode may have like had, you know, that inward gasp when you said you threw away 80 pages worth of work. Because sometimes we assume that because something's been thrown away that it didn't serve a purpose, that it was a waste.

And yet, what you just said confirms that those 80 pages were highly necessary; they just didn't end up in that form in the book, but you needed to do that work in order to really get to know the robots.

CC: Absolutely. Absolutely. And it's my process, because I find outlining sort of stiff and not fun. I love a first draft. I love jumping in, but going back and revising is always more difficult for me, but I also, I can relate to those kids when I go into classrooms who say they've done one revision on their stories.

That's usually what they say when I ask them. I usually tell them that I do up to 12 revisions for picture-books. I don't know how many revisions I did for this book; but many, many, many. [laughs] So yeah, that's how I discover my world, is just by drafting and drafting and drafting.

GP: For both of you, I'd love to hear because this transitions into that idea of like, 'what happens when we do have to cut something? What happens when you do an illustration and you love that picture of the lamp or whatever, but then it doesn't work with everything else or with the 80 pages that you have to throw out?' How do you bolster yourself against those moments that, let's face it, they are hard sometimes?

CC: Well, there was a character I left behind in those-- Now, when I say I threw out those 80 pages, I have a friend who deletes first drafts, completely deletes it. I am not that kind of crazy person.

[laughter]

CC: I do have the draft there and I did refer to it, but I just opened a new page and start typing. And I did, it was hard to leave that one character, this old lady behind, but I can always use her on another book. I can use her name. I did use her name. Her last name is Lark's last name. She was Mrs. Henkel. So, I can use bits and pieces of her. I wrote a novel this year, and I think she very much informed me in this novel; she's in there.

So, it's all grist for the mill, and it gets me to where I need to. And I just, I kind of thank things. It's weird, but I'll, let's say something someone said gave me an idea for a picture-book and I write that picture-book, but that one thing that the person or child said just doesn't work in the version. It was a jumping off point, but it just doesn't work. I have this moment of always thinking, 'but that's what it, where it started. That's what it's all about.'

And then I have to thank that moment or that detail and say, "Thank you for getting me to where this manuscript is, but now you need to go." I don't know why. I just need to thank it for giving me the inspiration, but know that it's not working now. And, it can always show up in another form, in another book.

GP: I love, love, love that. I think I'm going to have to borrow that because that's just brilliant. I love it.

CL: That's totally, that's like the Marie Kondo, right? Like, you can let things go once you've said, thank you.

[laughter]

CC: Never thought of that, but that's--

CL: It totally works with my daughter, when I was trying to let her, you know, just get her to let go of something she was not-- When we caught onto that idea of, you can say, "Thank you. I've loved having you in my life. You helped get me started. Thank you. And, now you can have another life somewhere else." It was like the magic piece that made her letting go of toys work, you know? And so, I love thinking about that in terms of story ideas and beginnings too. It's brilliant.

CC: I've always done that, and I've never connected to the two. I've read her book, I haven't practiced it yet.

[laughter]

CC: That's on it.

GP: I love that, the Marie Kondo version of editing; that's fantastic.

CL: Thank you, and goodbye.

GP: So, before we wrap up, I did want to dig into one other element in the story. One of the things that I think is sort of at the core, at the heart and soul of the story is the idea of making choices; and how characters, in particular, Penny Rose can make choices and kind has to like step into her life. Like in the beginning, her parents have moved.

She kind of doesn't have a whole lot of control about what's happening to her. And as the story goes on, she's making more and more proactive choices, at times. Sometimes those choices don't turn out as well as she would like, or that they may take on a life of their own.

So, can you talk a little bit about like, from a storytelling standpoint, this is super important in Middle Grade because, you know, kids often don't have 100% control over their own lives because they're kids; but them, you know, being able to read a story about a character who is making active choices in her life is both empowering, but also, helps them to work through stuff that happens in their own lives. So Carolyn, can you talk about that theme, that element of the story?

CC: Yes, sure. Friendship turned out to be such a big part of this story. And again, that was something I had to tease out, but I have had my own issues with friends; and I look to my own issues that I've had in not speaking up, not saying what's bothering me, keeping things from friends. I mean, I did all that in middle school, and I probably still do it today. And how do those decisions, how do they play out in my life?

I think that's so important for every middle schooler to see how your decisions and how you act towards others, can really get you in trouble or can get you out of trouble as well. So, I have to get my characters into big trouble in my books and that's always hard because I don't like to see my characters acting badly. I like to think that they're perfect, but perfect characters are the most boring characters on earth.

[laughter]

CC: So, I have to make them act in ways that are not perfect. I think a lot of writers are hesitant to do that, but they have to have some imperfect actions in order for the story to move forward, in order for

them to grow. And, you do grow from all those instances where you maybe have not been the best friend that you could be; you grow each and every time, and you learn something about yourself. I think Penny Rose learned a lot about herself by the end of that book.

GP: There's also something about like, because the story is driven by choices, it feels more active. Like a lot of times I think writers, particularly for children's books; middle grade and picture books, it's almost like they think because there's action happening that somehow that makes it an active story.

But sometimes the actions are just buffeting the character around, and the characters aren't really active participants in the decisions that drive the story. So, I think making the characters, empowering them to make those choices is really important.

CC: Yes. And again, that's what makes the stories; the character has to act. She has to make decisions, she has to move forward. Otherwise; she's not going to learn, she's not going to grow.

GP: Absolutely. So, I'd love to hear what's coming up next for each of you. What do you have in the works that you'd love to share with our listeners? What can we look forward to from you in the next couple of months or year, or what have you?

CC: Okay, I'll go.

[laughter]

CC: I just sold a novel to-- So, it's going to be my second novel.

GP: Yay!

CC: It's called Secondhand Dogs, and it's about a group of rescue dogs that this woman adopts and they're all peacefully coexisting. And then the woman adopts a new dog and he sort of disrupts the whole peace of the home; and forces the dog in charge to make decisions, to act. Really, I'm such a dog-freak. I love cats too, but I just, I adore my dogs. You could probably have heard my dog snoring in the background.

[laughter]

CC: I don't know you people do. And, it's about rescue dogs. My dog is a rescue dog. So, it's very near and dear to my heart, this novel; and it's coming out in 2021.

GP: Love it. And, you know, it's interesting what you said about like how that one new dog can totally disrupt the dynamic. So, we used to be a multiple cat family until we found out my son was allergic, and then we had to rehome-- Don't worry, all of our cats got safely rehomed except for one. But there was definitely a time before kids where we had, you know, we try to add a new cat to the mix.

And there was always that period of time where we were like, 'oh gosh, we broke the dynamic. Like, this is the cat that has ruined it all.' And, of course, eventually, they'd work things out amongst themselves, but like, there's always that, you know, when you add a new one to the mix that you just worry, like, 'Ugh, did I just ruin it forever?'

CC: Yeah, I actually got the idea after watching a video of this woman who only adopts senior dogs; and she has about 15 senior dogs living in her house.

GP: Wow.

CC: I'm a nice woman because that's a lot of poop to clean up.

[laughter]

CC: But I love that she did that. I do think other senior dogs are going to get along better with each other. So, I had to make my dogs younger, but yeah, one bad apple can upset the whole-- I'm just going to say one thing that I might have written it during the elections; it's possible. It's possible I wrote that book during the elections; I'm just saying,

GP: [laughs] What about you, Corinna? What do you have in the works?

CL: Well, I have something with a dog in it coming out soon too, or not that soon, but next year. So, the next picture-book that is coming out from me is called Nothing in Common. It's written by Kate Hoefler, who wrote this book, Rabbit and the Motorbike, that just came out and a number of other beautiful books, real Cowboys. And so that is a story about two kids that have nothing in common, but perhaps they do.

There's a dog that is an important part of that story, and an old man. So, that's been really fun and I've just turned all the art in for that. I'm working on the case cover that will go under the jacket right now, and then that's the last thing; and just finished up the book jacket. So, that's super exciting.

And then, I'm about to turn my attention to my next book as author-illustrator, which was actually going to be a book called The Arguers, which was about kingdom of people that do a lot of arguing.

And I may have been working on that around the time of the election as well, but that story needs a little more time to come together. And so I'm actually, we just switched things around. And my next book that I'm the author-illustrator of will be called The Tree in Me. And, it will hopefully be out in time for Earth Day, 2021. So yeah.

GP: Love it. Well, I always like to end with the same question; what's your number one tip for writers, or Corinna, in your case, writer storytellers?

CC: I have sort of an unusual tip, but I recommend taking acting classes.

CL: Mm.

GP: Mm.

CC: I love theater and I've done theater my whole life, and improv. I love improv, but for one thing, as a published-author, you will be asked to speak a lot. So, it helps to become comfortable in front of an audience. It just helps. Improv helps you just realize that, 'oh, so that was stupid what I just said? Who cares? Let's move on.'

But in scene work, which I've been doing a lot of in the past couple of years, it's really helped me inhabit a character and helps me-- All the scene work that I do informs my novels because I think to myself, 'well, how would I, if I were portraying this character, how would I move during this scene? What would I be thinking? What would my face be doing at this point in time?' That really, really helps with my writing.

GP: Oh, I love that.

CL: That's great advice. I love that. And as for illustrators there's, similarly, I guess for me, I actually took a number of dance improvisation classes in college, which I sort of accidentally found myself in and then really completely fell in love with, because of what it did for my drawing, partly; and also my relationship with the creative process, because, like you were saying, that improvisation: to me, it's everything, honestly. It's key, is just that.

Being able to say, "Yes", and "Oops, I didn't like that. That was awkward. That was strange. But let's keep moving forward"; I think that's really key helpful thing to keep by your side in a tool for the creative process. For me, I think when I think about advice, one of the main things I would say that you probably hear all the time; but I think it's really, really true is to just read a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot.

That's just as true for illustrators as it is for writers, in particular, with illustration; I think if you're not reading a lot, if you're only reading a little and you're only falling in love with a small amount of work, it can become really problematic because you can't help, but be influenced by the artwork that you love and the styles of the people that you love.

So, if you've only fallen in love with a couple different styles or a couple illustrators, there's a really good chance that your work looks way too much like theirs. I have found the more that you read and the more you fall in love with; the more that goes in, the more it just mixes up like a big stew and comes out looking very much like your own work and like you, and not like someone else. And so for me, that means reading a lot of current contemporary work, but also taking deep, deep dives into books from long ago. So read, read, read.

CC: I have to just add absolutely to that. Sometimes when I hear people say, "Oh, I just-- You know, there's nothing good out there. I don't like to read children's books because, you know, I don't feel like there's anything good out there." And, I think, 'why are you writing them?'

[laughter]

CC: Because there are some really fabulous books out there. So, you haven't really delved deeply into picture-books or novels. If you just can flat-out say, "There's nothing funny", or "I couldn't find anything good for my child to read"; oh, come on.

CL: Oh, come on. Yeah, no, then you haven't been looking.

CC: And so, I really have such a knee-jerk reaction to that type of statement from people. I think that that kind of grandiosity gets in the way of their work. If that's what they think, then they're just not going to create an accessible book for a child. And, it's fun. Let's face it. Reading books for kids is just so much fun. Why wouldn't you do it all the time?

[laughter]

GP: You know, Corinna, also, I love what you said about kind of when we allow all these different influences, they kind of get mixed together. Because, especially with newer writers, I find that sometimes there's that fear that they may inadvertently copy a thing that someone has already created, right? Like that they didn't realize that someone had already written about X, Y, Z; and then they write about it.

But I think your solution is so great because, at the end of the day, if we've managed to take in all these different influences, whether it's through, you know, looking at different forms of art or reading, you know, books with different voices, or what have you, there kind of; it does kind of become like a mish-mash, a soup, as it were.

I think, Carolyn, you alluded to the idea of soup earlier in this interview, but like, then it's kind of all mixed together; and we're not really copying any one thing. We're sort of making it all our own, which is, I think, the end goal.

CL: Yeah. And that's also, I think part of why this is a process that takes time, you know, when you are just starting out; and maybe you have not read as much, and you have not fallen in love with it as wider a variety. You know, sometimes, we have the styles that we're naturally drawn to, whether it's art or words we like; that kind of writing, and that kind of picture.

I think there's a point in your creative process and in your career where you suddenly start to love things that you never would've thought you would've loved. You fall in love with books in a style that you never really thought was your kind of style. And that's when you know, like you're really growing; and you're really becoming educated about the industry and what's come before, but you're also, your pool of influences is getting bigger and bigger, which it should be.

Like, you should be capable of falling deeply in love with work that looks very, very different than your own. Ideally, lots of different kinds because they do go in influence. But you know early on that may not be the case. Early on, you might have three favorite illustrators or writers; and that's also why you, you know, most people don't publish. Most people have a long backstory.

You know, for me, 18 years before my first book came out, because those early things maybe weren't too heavily influenced by a handful of people. And maybe that wasn't really what the world needed, but with time and with persistence, you know, because it takes time, I guess, to read a lot of books and incorporate it all into your style; you know, in that unconscious sort of way. So, that's that time piece too, that I think is just an important part of the process. So, it's like read a lot, but also be patient with yourself.

GP: You know, this is one of the reasons I love doing this podcast because it forces me to read things that I probably wouldn't have thought to pick up, and yet I end up loving. I mean, if I had my way, I'd probably be reading Middle Grade and YA all the time. And, I'd probably never read books for grownups, but this podcast makes sure that I do, which is a good thing. So yay!

CC: No, I just wanted to add one thing because I love that, and what Corinna just said, but I also wanted to add that sometimes what I did as a writer, which is sort of the inside-out, the flip side of that; it's, if I found a picture-book, especially that I loved, I would type it out.

GP: Mm.

CC: I would, 'Oh yes'. And that's a really interesting way of getting under the skin of a book, sort of; and seeing where the bones are, and how they did what they did, and why did I love that? And so that's something you can almost only see if you just type it out, just type out the words.

"Why is that so beautiful? Oh, she didn't use any adjectives at all." It wasn't, you know, especially wordy; it was very concise or whatever it is. It's a really helpful exercise. I agree that if you read enough, you will not imitate-- Ursu and I both had characters named Lark--

[laughter]

CC: We had a little girl who had crows delivered gifts to them, you know? So, that is really similar. And yet, our books couldn't be more different. So, you can't worry about that. And the more deeply you read, the more you will find your way.

GP: I love that idea of typing it out. Sometimes I get even nerdier; I will write it out with one of those dip pens, so that, especially if it's an older story, like, so that I actually feel like what it would've been like to write, like the opening lines of Pride and Prejudice, the way Jane Austen would've had to do it. And, like, how often she would've had to dip her pen to get the words out onto the page. It's like really like visceral feeling of, 'yeah, it's cool'. I mean, it gets really boring after about, you know, a page, but it's a very effective way to get into a story.

CC: That's cool. I love that.

GP: Well, ladies, I feel like we could be here jamming about writing and drawing and all this amazing stuff for like the next five hours, but we can't. Thank you so much for being on the show. This has been such a great conversation.

CL: Thank you. Thank you so much for having us.

CC: Yes, I loved it. It was so much fun.

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