



*Cynthia Grady*

## 203: The Art of Nonfiction Picture Books

**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 today are over at [diymfa.com/203](http://diymfa.com/203), because it's Episode 203.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing author Cynthia Grady about her beautiful nonfiction picture book titled *Write to Me: Letters from Japanese American Children to the Librarian They Left Behind*. Cynthia grew up in the Bay Area in California, and she taught elementary school there for quite some time. Later, she moved east and went to graduate school where she earned her Master's degrees in Children's Literature, Library Science, and the Classics.

As a Latin nerd myself, I have to say that that part of her bio super warmed my heart. Cynthia has authored three books for children. One is a book of poetry, and two are nonfiction picture books. She's been a children's librarian for 17 years before she relocated to New Mexico where she now writes, makes quilts, enjoys her pet rabbits, and is learning how to garden in the desert - not an easy feat. Welcome, Cynthia. It is so great to have you on the show.

**Cynthia Grady:** Thank you. It's great to be here.

**GP:** So, I always love to start our interviews by finding out about the story behind the story. And this book is just-- I mean, the subject is so unique; it's such a unique story that I have to imagine that there is a story behind why you wrote this book. What drew you to the story of this librarian in the first place?

**CG:** I first learned about Clara Breed, a librarian in 1920 San Diego, about the third year that I was working in libraries. I was fascinated to learn that she wrote letters and sent books to children in the prison camps during World War 2; and I wanted to learn more about her. So, I looked and looked and looked for books about her; biographies of her, and I couldn't find any.

And so I took the-- I took the advice that, you know, writers always give at conferences; and they say, "Write the book you want to read." And so that's what I attempted to do, but it was a long time coming.

**GP:** Well, and this book also draws from a lot of like primary source material, right? Like, you learned a lot by looking at these actual letters from the kids and from the, I guess from the kids primarily to this librarian; can you tell us a little bit about how you assembled the story that became this picture book?

**CG:** Yes. I knew from the very beginning that I wanted it to be a picture book; a biography, in particular. It's my favorite genre of children's books. I wanted to tell the story of Clara Breed in the context of World War II. I learned about a videotape, a video that the Japanese American National Museum had put together about her life; and I immediately ordered it.

And, that's the first research I did. From there I did go right to-- I started studying the war, researching the incarceration of Japanese Americans, and went to-- I spent a week at the Japanese American

National Museum reading the letters because they had not been digitized yet. This was back in 2006, I think, 2005-2006. So, they hadn't been digitized, so I spent a week there and reading and taking notes on them.

And, at the time, I knew I wanted it to be a picture book. So, I was just focusing on the letters by the youngest children, but they didn't tell much story. So, I had to go into the letters written by the teenagers, which were long; some were 3, 5, 10 page long letters written in, you know, written by hand. And, they were 60, 70 years old. They were much harder to read, but proved quite valuable.

**GP:** That's amazing. I mean, the fact that these letters exist, that this has been archived is kind of amazing as well; and just such a wonderful, like a, a resource, a window into that moment in history. One of the things that you kind of touched on right at the beginning is this idea of choosing to write it as a nonfiction picture book. And that to me, is so fascinating because-- I mean, I love picture books.

I love children's books, but it's clearly a deliberate choice and there are advantages and disadvantages to writing something as a non-fiction picture book than say, as a non-fiction book for grownups or even a non-fiction middle grade. What made you choose picture book, in particular, as the art form to portray the story?

**CG:** It might be my poetry background. I loved the marriage of words and image; and in poetry, poetry itself does that without illustrations, though there's plenty of illustrated poetry books too. But I think with non-fiction, especially, the image helps convey information and adds so much texture to a story.

**GP:** I wholeheartedly agree. You know, it's interesting too, like the way-- I mean, obviously, you're the author, you're not the illustrator of the story, but I love the interplay of how the images; particularly, the handwritten letters appear in this picture book, because we get a feel for each of these kids based on their handwriting. Like, it's not just, we're reading the text as typed out on the page.

We're actually almost seeing like a little replica of each of these postcards in the illustrations. And that, to me, I think captures the story in such a sort of profound way. And yet, it's very-- It's a small detail, something that, you know, other books might just do it in type and not even think about it, but this really adds depth to the story.

**CG:** Right. I immediately knew I wanted the postcards to be part of the illustrations. I didn't know, being such a new writer, I only had two previous books. I didn't know if that's something I could even say to my editor, but I loved the way they turned out. What I ended up doing was sending the ages of, so we have one or two sentence excerpts from every letter that I chose to use. And, I sent the ages of the children who wrote each letter so that they could adjust the handwriting to match the age of the child. Does that make sense?

**GP:** It absolutely makes sense. And, you know, it's interesting too what you said; like, "I didn't even know that I could ask for that." So, how did you navigate that? Because like, I think it's important for our listeners.

Not everyone may be aware that the author has very little, often has very little control over the illustrations in a picture book that unless you are the author-illustrator, that often that happens outside of the author's sort of realm control. So, how did you navigate that to convey that in a way that was, you know, that made it easy for your editor and for the illustrator to hop on board with?

**CG:** That is a good question. You're right that authors have little control over that. The publisher usually picks the illustrator based on their experience. And so I think I felt so welcome by my publisher,



by Charlesbridge, that I felt very comfortable making that request right away. The manuscript had the story typed out, and then I put the postcard letters as little sidebars in italic for the manuscript and explained how I envisioned it.

And they, right away, they were on board with it. And then as we went through the revision process, we discussed how, and in what order and that sort of thing. So, I didn't have much control over that, the illustrations in general, but I did have a lot of-- I did get to have a lot of say, I think I was just very lucky and very impressed and pleased with the way the publisher navigated it with me.

**GP:** You know, it's interesting too, because I think there are, you know, a lot of-- I go to a lot of conferences; and at a lot of conferences, one of the first things that they, you know, will say, when they're talking about picture books is exactly this. They'll be like, "Writers, forget having any control over the illustrations." It's kind of almost like the agents and the editors are sort of like telling the cold, hard truth.

And then, and yet, and yet I think that if you know how to navigate and negotiate the scenario, you can have a little bit more say than I think they make it sound like we do as writers. I mean, just from my own experience, my own book, DIY MFA, there are no major illustrations in them. And the graphics that I produced were produced by me, but there was some say.

There was some give and take in the conversation around the design because of sort of the way as writers we can couch things. I think the way you talked about it just now is super smart. Like the fact that you put those postcards in the sidebar so that it clearly was part of the story, but you allowed the, but clearly the freedom was for the illustrator to kind of run with it however they thought it would fit.

That's sort of the way to-- You know, that's a way to do it that I think makes everyone on the same team as opposed to like author versus illustrator; and it becomes like an antagonistic thing.

**CG:** Right. Exactly. And also, I think because it's a non-fiction book, that might be another reason why I had some input. I've got to review the sketches. I didn't see the final art really, but I did see the sketches. It was important that I was queued into them because for accuracy purposes, because the illustrations have to be as accurate as the text in a nonfiction book, right?

And so there were a few changes that had-- There was one illustration actually that wouldn't have been the way it was, wouldn't have been true. And I did mention that and get to; and so that was corrected at the sketch stage, which was a good thing.

**GP:** That's fascinating too, because I would imagine that in some types of fiction, the accuracy would also be important; particularly fiction where say, like, if it's Historical Fiction, where there might be a historical inaccuracy that could, you know, not ring true for the story, or if it's some sort of fantasy world that the author has created, that the illustration needs to fit within that world building constraint.

So, I think that's another sort of angle, if we're talking about like, how do we as writers strategically negotiate for what we would like in our illustrations? I see that as like another bargaining chip that writers can potentially use to help, to bolster their case, right? To say, "Hey, look, I'd love to help out with the accuracy." And, that's a way to sort of become part of the conversation.

**CG:** Definitely. I think, you know, depending on how the editor and Art Director work together, I think, you know, that can be an easier situation than others. You know, I have not very much experienced, but so far, I've been lucky.



**GP:** I find too that like, if an author, especially if it's a scenario where it's a much bigger publisher, if the author has an agent, that agent often also knows the dynamics between the editors and Art Directors and the different teams, even better than the author will know them. Because for the author, it might be the one book that you're writing, but the agent may have wrapped multiple books with that house and they may have a better-- They may be keyed in, I think, a little bit better to the dynamics between different people.

**CG:** Yeah. That's a good point. Hadn't thought of that; that the agent will know the relationships and dynamics at every house they work with. And, that's something I haven't thought about because I don't have an agent yet.

**GP:** I think there's some give and take. I think some agents might be more keyed-in than others. I think it depends on sort of the nature of those relationships as well. One of the other things that I kind of wanted to circle back, and I know I'm sort of continuously circling back to the, why a nonfiction picture book question, but there's so much there to unpack.

I feel like this is just a really juicy thing that we need to talk about. One of the things that I love about picture books, particularly, but children's books when they're nonfiction is that, of course, they're going to be accurate, but they're also very down-to-the-point. That's one of the things I love about non-fiction.

This is why if I need to ever research anything, one of the first places I go is to the children's section of a library and pull a children's book off the shelf on that topic, because it'll be much more readable and give me sort of the overview of the topic way faster than if I tried to plow through a book for grownups on that subject. So, I was wondering also, if there was something about kind of the sort of pure simplicity of a non-fiction picture book, as opposed to a sort of larger tome that maybe drew you to this form.

**CG:** I agree. And, I do the same thing when I'm researching. I absolutely go first to the children's section, in fact, and that's what I did. I looked through what picture books had been written about this time during World War II for Japanese Americans; and there was very little and very little recent picture books done. I do like the simplicity. I do like the way there will be like an emotional arc. It's not just information, but a story, you know, between and among people who have a relationship.

In my book, the story is told through the letters; but, in particular, through one child, Katherine Tasaki and her relationship with Miss Breed, and everything else supports that; that's what I wanted to tell. I wanted to tell her story and Miss Breed, and in the context of the war, and I think a picture book--

And, for me, I consider myself a poet first, and most things come to me as poems first, and then I have to expand it to make it a story or expand it to make it a narrative nonfiction piece. So, that's basically what I did. This book took many forms before it finally hit the mark.

**GP:** You know, it's interesting too, that you consider yourself a poet first. And, in many ways, I mean, most picture books, I'm not just talking Dr. Seuss here, like I'm talking, you know, picture book that are truly prose, but yet they do read like poetry. Like if you were to strip away the images and type it out on a page, it reads like poetry.

I'm thinking, for instance, of like Jane Yolen's Owl Moon, which is written in prose, but it feels like a poem; and other books that are not written, you know, in the rhyming couplet style of say, you know, Green Eggs and Ham, but they still feel like poems. I'm thinking like the Little Elliot books and stuff, they feel very poetic even though they're-- Maybe it's the sparseness of the writing, the sparseness of the words, but there's something about it that feels very poetic to me.



**CG:** Absolutely. One of my great heroes and mentors for writing this kind of picture book is Jen Bryant, who's done several picture book biographies, and I study her writing, but she's a master of telling-- She often tells an entire life. Mine is just a slice of three-and-a-half years of a person's life, but she'll do a cradle-to-grave biography as a picture book, and has masterfully done with poetic language.

**GP:** That's also a fascinating choice in my mind too. I mean, here, obviously, it makes sense because it's, you know, anchored by the children having to leave because of the situation historically, and then the one child coming back, right? So, they're leaving-- I guess they were in San Diego, right?

So, they were leaving San Diego, and then the one child comes back to see the librarian again. And so, in that way, it was a clear sort of slice of life, but there's also like a whole other life of that librarian or of that child beyond the sort of lens of this story. So, I mean, did you consider at any point, the idea of expanding it or were you really just focused on that one three-and-a-half year span?

**CG:** That is such a good question because it took me 12 years to sell this book, and it was first-- The original draft was very close to this draft, not as good, but very close, and then different-- I submitted it to a number of publishing houses that gave recommendations. They all said they liked the story. They liked my writing and they gave recommendations, suggestions for expanding it.

One, in particular, wanted to know more about Clara Breed; her life, her childhood, what led her to become this woman she became when she was in her 30s during the war. And so, I expanded it in a big way so it was still a picture book, but much longer. It would've been 40, 48 pages rather than 32. That took me another year to expand it and do more research into her life and her family.

By the time I resubmitted it to that publishing house, that editor was no longer there, and the new editor was not interested in the book. So, then I was peddling the longer version to other publishers who did longer format nonfiction books for younger children; and had no luck until, finally, I found an editor interested in the story, if it were the smaller slice of life period piece, if that makes sense.

**GP:** It makes total sense. And, you know, it's so funny too, how that happens, right? That like, sometimes one piece of feedback may seemingly derail a project, right? Like, that we'll sort of rewrite an entire project to fit one person's suggestion of what they think the story should be.

And then we rewrite it and it turns out that it actually was better the first way; and we kind of come full circle and end up back where we started. And yet, if we hadn't explored that other possibility, we may not have really, truly embraced the version we ended up landing on.

**CG:** Right. And, a lot of what was in that expanded version ended up in the back matter of this book. You know, timelines-- I mean, I took a lot of narrative and made it into a timeline; and an author's note, there's two different timelines. I forget what else was in the back. I ended up using a lot of it anyway. And, you know, teachers and librarians love back matters so it all ended up working. I have, yeah, an author's note, two timelines, and then source notes, and all that.

**GP:** You know, I think that just goes to show that like, nothing is ever wasted. Like, even if we think, "Oh man, it was better the first way, I just wasted---" [however many years it was that it took you to rewrite it the long way and then rewrite it back the short way], you know, the temptation would be for us as writers to beat ourselves up and go, 'Oh man, I just wasted all that time'.

And yet, exactly like you said, none of that was wasted; it all went into the back matter of the book. I think for our listeners, it's important also to highlight that this is another beauty of children's books is that all of that extra material becomes like teaching material that teachers can use or librarians or parents.



And it can be, if it's not packaged within the book package itself, it could become potential lesson plan you offer on your website. It could become some sort of downloadable thing that the author has on their website, whatever it is, but there it's never lost. All of that work can always have a bigger purpose and can fit into the big picture of that project.

**CG:** Yeah, that is so true. That is really true. It can also be a springboard for another book possibly. I don't have one in mind, but I know other writers have done that. They turn their research into 2, 3, 5 more books.

**GP:** Exactly. I mean, and you know, if we're going to be writing, spending, as long as we spend on a book and a picture book manuscripts, people often think that they're easy, because they're short. They're probably the hardest thing there is to write, like on the planet, you know?

And so like if you're going to spend that much time researching a picture book, you got to do something with all that research, because it's just a lot of work for very few words; you need to be able to expand that, I think. So, you're spot on, on that one.

Another thing I wanted to sort of-- Kind of, moving into a slightly different angle on this topic, is also discussing like the subject of this book because, you know, a lot of people think that picture books are, you know, they're books for kids and they're fun. You know, there's that feeling that, somehow, children's book is not going to be as serious as books for adults.

And yet, this book tackles a very serious topic. It tackles a very dark moment in our nation's history, and it tackles a subject that is really terrifying. Like the idea that these children were essentially uprooted from their homes with nothing more than they could carry and their parents could carry, and put in a camp; like, that is terrifying.

And so I wanted to talk about sort of the, what the experience was like conveying this subject to kids because I imagine, it must have been challenging as a writer to sort of grapple with that tug of war being true to the subject matter, but also, you know, you want to be true to your audience and not sugarcoat it, but also not, you know, doom and gloom it to, to death.

So, how did you-- I mean, this book I felt-- It was very heartwarming and also like kind of, I felt lifted up by it and that's hard to do. So, how did you grapple with the subject because I imagine there was a lot of grappling on your part?

**CG:** There is so much grappling. I can't say I know how I did it, but I know I wanted to do it. I grew up in California so I knew about the intern of Japanese Americans, but I don't remember when I learned about it. In California now, it's taught in fourth grade, fourth grade Social Studies, but it wasn't when I was in fourth grade and I don't remember learning about it. I probably learned about it in high school.

So, I was still kind of young, but definitely not picture book age. I think it's where: (A) you have to find the story to tell. And, I wanted to tell Clara Breed's story and Katherine Tasaki's story of how, Clara's understanding of Art and Literature could help these children cope with their circumstances.

For me, it's all about the power of the book, the power of reading, the power of story that will get us through any hard time we have or almost any hard time we're dealing with. So, to me, it's a book first. In fact, my early drafts were really focused on the power of story, and how important reading is to us in times of distress. I gradually added background in history and the war to my original story.



**GP:** And, it's fascinating to me too, because as we see the letters go on within the story, we see how the kids are drawing inferences between their own experience, and then these books that they're reading. There was one, like it literally gave me chills, like goosebumps, when I read it; the one child who's saying something like, "I would never have understood or appreciated X book--", whatever, I can't even remember what the book was, "-if I wasn't, if it wasn't for where I am now".

And, you know, the child was sort of comparing, I think, like this dystopian desert world to like the desert that they were in Arizona or something to that effect. But like, it literally gave me chills because it gave me this feeling of, you know, even though I, as an adult now in, you know, 2018 cannot even begin to wrap my head around what those kids experienced in that moment.

But there's that same feeling that we have when we experience something, and then we read a book that captures that experience in a really profound way. And, we too have that feeling of, 'wow, I never would've gotten this out of this book if I hadn't been going through this other struggle in my life'.

And, that is such a universal nugget that every human being can hold onto. And, I think that's what you, I think also ties to what you were saying about finding that story, because that story, even if it's very specific to the people and the time in which it takes place, the story can feel universal, because people can see pieces of themselves in that story.

**CG:** Yeah. I know the letter you're speaking of; and that one, that was certainly a gift. So, the book helped the child identify and relate to a universal kind of situation, and it's just a way to connect. She could connect to her humanity through someone else's story, whether it's fiction or nonfiction.

**GP:** Exactly. And, I think too, like you were saying, when it's following the story of the people in the book, like Clara Breed and Katherine, that we can identify with them because they're human beings, as opposed to like, if it's sort of a 'news real-esque account', then there's no story to latch onto as a reader. And, it's harder for us to see ourselves or identify with what's happening in that situation.

**CG:** Right. Even as image-filled as today's news is, if you don't have the story and the emotions that go with what's happening, you can be pretty desensitized to it these days.

**GP:** I know, isn't that the truth, right? Like that, even these days; we're bombarded with images, we're bombarded with information. And yet, how often do we really get a story, a true story, not just like, you know, like let's do the, you know, sweet segment on the news about the person who lost their dog.

Not like that kind of fluff story, but like a true story about a human being with a struggle and really that we can identify as opposed to just having it be sensationalized, as you said. I think that that's really what non-fiction particularly in a children's book form, can give to us. So, as you were pulling together, these, all of this information, all of these pieces of research that you did, all of these letters that you said some of them were multiple pages long and you used a fragment of them; how do you choose?

**CG:** It was so hard. It was so hard. And, this is what I've learned in my third book is that the writer has a vision for the story. The editor has a vision for the story; and then the Art Director and illustrator have another vision for the story. And, as those visions converge and are negotiated, everything in the text needs to change, right? That's the whole revision process once you're under revision with an editor. And so my books focus--

I was a librarian and I was a teacher before that, and my original story focused on that; the power of story. And then we added more details about the war, so I needed more letters. I had to go back



to the letters, and find more talk about the war and the conditions of the camp during the war. And, you know, what was happening at home, people would write letters to them and people would send them newspaper clippings of what was happening to their property.

And so I would return again and again to the letters, but luckily, by the time-- This was the blessing of not having sold it so much earlier. The blessing was, by the time I was under revision with my editor, everything had been digitized. There were more than 250 letters that had been written and they were now all online or most of them were online. So, I didn't have to keep flying back to LA to do the research.

**GP:** You know, I was about to ask you that, because in the beginning, you alluded to the letters being, you know, on paper. And, I could only imagine these letters, how fragile they must have been. So, I was about to ask you like, how the heck did you do that with like paper letters? So, that answered my question.

So, in terms of, you've written three books already; two of them have been nonfiction for kids. What's next for you? Do you see your next project going back to the poetry or do you see it staying in the picture book nonfiction realm, or are you thinking of striking in a totally new direction?

**CG:** Well, I've never thought of myself as a nonfiction writer at all. So, I'm surprised; I'm working on a novel right now for middle grade readers, but I also have some poetry manuscripts I'm working on. And, I'm kind of right at this moment, jumping from project to project.

I can't seem to settle on one, so I'm not sure what that's about, but I do have a nonfiction collection of poetry that I'm working on all about water and the scarcity and the need necessity of water. But I also have a Chapter Book and a middle grade novel that I'm about halfway through with both. So, I need to really settle on something and get something finished. [laughs]

**GP:** So, just with the poetry, do you tend to focus on, is it poetry for kids or is it poetry for grownups?

**CG:** I write both, but I focus on the children's market. It's just what I love. I love the art of their books, and I love the children's and reading. So, that's what I focus on, but I do write for both markets.

**GP:** I love it. As a fan of children's books, I can completely identify with that. It's just, it's interesting too, that, you know, in my mind, as I was asking that question, I even almost stopped myself because I'm like, well, is there even a distinction? And, I suppose there is some distinction between poetry for adults and poetry for kids, but it can also be very blurry. I think a lot of kids-- Kids understand more than we give them credit for, I think.

**CG:** Absolutely. In fact, I get really frustrated with the children's poetry market because everyone wants my poetry to be more childlike, and I don't think it needs to be. [laughs]

**GP:** I agree wholeheartedly. I think, you know, this also ties back to that issue of like, you know, tackling difficult topics in a book for kids. I think a lot of times people don't give kids the credit that they're due in terms of what they're able to understand, what they're able to process in terms of like the sort of darkness of the subject matter. And so I think that kind of also-- It's not just something in poetry; I think it's in children's literature, in general. I think kids are often not given as much credit as they should.

**CG:** Definitely, because they have rich full lives by the time they're five and entering schools. So yeah, absolutely, they can absorb and take in much more sophisticated work that's being produced for them.





**GP:** Absolutely. So, when it comes to juggling all of these different projects-- I mean, you mentioned that you yourself are grappling with this idea of like, which one I'm going to focus on, but, at some point, you've written three books already and published three books already. At some point, you decided on each of those projects; I'm going to knuckle down and work on this thing.

What is it that helps you zero-in on that project that deserves your full attention? And, I ask this, by the way, because I know a lot of our listeners, and me as well, also struggle with the same problem of having a million balls in the air and not knowing where to focus our creative energy.

**CG:** Right. My first book, *I Lay My Stitches Down*, I decided to just see if I could do it. I wanted to see if I could write 13 to 15 poems about American slavery, where each poem was titled with a traditional quilt block pattern; like *Birds in the Air* or *Underground Railroad*. And so I just challenged myself and I thought, 'if I write one or two poems a month, I could do this in a year's time'.

And, somehow, I just was able to focus on that. I wasn't even thinking about publication; that probably helped. I just said, "I'm going to see if I can do it." And, I did. And, that took me about nine months and then I started sending it up. And, my second book was unusual.

The illustrator of my first book, Michele Wood, asked if I would write the text for a series of illustrations she was doing. She wanted to illustrate 13 African American spirituals, and to have a little text to go with each one. And, I first turned her down. I turned her down actually several times saying, "No, no, no, I don't want to do it"; because I was starting my novel, and I said I want to work on my own stuff. And, I eventually said, yes, if her agent could sell the; I would write a proposal and if her agent could sell it, I would write the book. And so I was able to focus on that because I had to [laughs] to make the book better. The proposal was sold.

And so, luckily I was going on sabbatical; and I was able to just focus on that. So, that was like doing homework because I had to do it for someone else in a way. And then, *Write to Me*, my third book, I was sort of dabbling and dipping into during my other two projects. I wrote it and I submitted it for a few years; and then I put it aside and started working on other things that I haven't been able to sell.

So, I just came back to that, but that wasn't a focused in Denver, actually. I was just sort of all over the place with it for many years. So, I'm trying to get back to my first book, where I can just sort of challenge myself and see, 'can I write a novel or not?' And so that's what I'd like to spend the next, you know, six months doing. Maybe now that I've said that in public, maybe I will be able to, I don't know. [laughs]

**GP:** There is something to that, you know, like that whole idea of; you put it out there into the universe and people actually hear it, then you kind of got to do it. You know, it's interesting too; one of the things I love as you were sort of thinking through that is that there are a lot of different reasons and motivations that help us writers get the words on the page.

Sometimes it could be more loosey-goosey, like what you described with *Write to Me*, where you kind of go in different directions and then you start other things, and eventually it comes to fruition. And then other times, it might be a more focused project, like the homework example or the, you know, challenging yourself; like, can I really do this thing, and setting a challenge for yourself? So, I think, and there's no wrong way.

I mean, in the end, all three of those approaches produced similar results, right? You got three beautiful books out of the picture. There's no real like right or wrong way of doing it, and writers can



also choose different paths for different books. I think, often, newer writers think that there's just one way to do it; and that like, you know, writers write out of the gate. Like, they just know how to do this process. And, it's so not like that. I mean, I'm still making stuff up as I go all the time.

**CG:** Right. And, I have like a few manuscripts out on submission now that, you know, who knows what will come of those while I'm trying to focus on my next project? So, we'll have to wait and see.

**GP:** I think that's another important thing to mention as well, is that like, as a writer, particularly if you're writing shorter work, like picture books, where, you know, not that it's easier, but that you may be able to produce more of them, say, in a year than you would with a novel.

But having multiple, you know, projects in different stages of completion, I think can also be helpful. I know a lot of people who write short fiction, will often have multiple short stories in varying stages: some in the drafting, some in revision, some out on submission; and that's kind of how you keep that steady stream of projects going to market, as it were.

**CG:** Right. And, it keeps you, if you get-- If I get real, very discouraged on one project, I can just put it away and go right to something else, because for the reasons you said; they're in different stages of completion. Some people don't like to do that, they don't like to sort of dilute their thinking on one project by going to another.

But for me, so far, it's what I'm doing; and I think it's what's working for me. We'll see as I go along, but I think it's helpful for me because the slowness, the publication, and the rejection gets to it first after a while. So, it's always nice to have something new to work on, or something in process to work on.

**GP:** You know, and it's interesting too, what you were saying. I mean, the rejection definitely having something to kind of soften that and just like redirect our attention. And, sometimes we just get exhausted by a project. Like, sometimes you're beating your head against the wall with a project so much that you just need to step away. I don't know about-- I say 'you', really I mean me.

Sometimes I beat my head against the wall, and I don't know what else to do. And so it's just, I need to step away and look at something else. And then suddenly, I come back to the original thing that I was beating my head on; and it like opens up, and I know exactly what I need to do. I call this actually-- I call it productive procrastination.

It's like, I'm procrastinating on thing (A) by working on some other productive projects. And, then I come back to thing (A) when thing (A) is, you know, almost due; and I still get thing (A) done, but I am being, you know, I'm procrastinating in a productive manner.

**CG:** Right? I like that 'productive procrastination'. I'm going to borrow that.

**GP:** [laughs] So, I always like to end every interview with the same question. And you've already given us so many nuggets of wisdom on this interview, but if you had to boil everything down to one tip, what would your number one tip for writers be?

**CG:** I think my number one tip for writers, especially, nonfiction or historical fiction writers would be to take way more notes than you think you need and organize them in a way that is very simple because my vision for the book changed over the years and it took so long for it to finally coalesce to what it is now.



I had to go back to my notes so many times; and I did not take enough notes and I didn't have them organized. And so I think that would be my number one tip is to take way more notes than you think you need. And, I have one other-- Can I give a second tip?

**GP:** Absolutely. Guys, you're getting two for one.

[laughter]

**CG:** My second tip would be what I've just started doing. And, I think it's working for me is that to try to look at your manuscript like a big jigsaw puzzle with people missing; and the different people in your world can tell you, not what they think is missing, but whether something's missing.

Like, your writing critique partners can say more than others, probably, what is missing; but then your editors who are rejecting you or agents who say, 'not here yet'. If you look at it as a puzzle that needs to be completed, then there's less sting in all of the criticism.

**GP:** I love that because, you know, it's like, then it's almost like you're mining those rejections for clues, as opposed to like taking them to heart. It's almost like not that one would ever welcome a rejection, but in a way, it's like, yeah, like you said, it lessens the sting; and there's sort of a silver lining to getting that negative feedback because now you filled in a piece of the puzzle.

**CG:** Right. Yeah. You have more information, so you can hopefully complete the puzzle.

**GP:** I love it. Thank you so much for both of those insights. And, thank you so much for being on the show today, Cynthia, it has been such a pleasure having you on.

**CG:** Well, thank you. It's been great, this has been really fun.

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

