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Amy Alznauer

326: Painting, Math, and Tiny Houses: Writing the Picture Book Biography

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/326 because it's Episode 326. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast; and please, leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there discover the show as well.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Amy Alznauer. Amy lives in Chicago with her husband, two children, a dog and her four puppies, a parakeet, sometimes chicks and a part-time fish, but, as of right now, no elephants or peacocks.

Her writing has won the Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction, the Christopher Award, and the SCBWI-Illinois Laura Crawford Memorial Mentorship. Her essays and poetry have appeared in collections and literary journals including The Bellingham Review, Creative Nonfiction, and River Teeth.

She has an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Pittsburgh. She teaches calculus and number theory at Northwestern University. She is the managing editor for the SCBWI-Illinois Prairie Wind. And, she is the writer-in-residence at St. Gregory the Great, where she has a little office in a big building with a bad internet, so she occasionally is able to get some work done.

Her picture book biography of the Zhou Brothers titled Flying Paintings is out now. She's also the author of two other picture book biographies; The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity and The Strange Birds of Flannery O'Connor all of which we're going to be talking about here today. Welcome, Amy. It is so great to have you here.

Amy Alznauer: Thank you so much, Gabriela.

GP: So, before we dive in and talk about the different biographies, I wanted to start with like the story behind the whole process. Like, you teach math, you have an MFA, you've had all these different disparate pieces in your life; how did you end up writing picture book biographies?

AA: Well, it really started with the first one that came out this year, The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity, because that story has been with me all my life, which I'm happy to talk about, but I've always known that I was going to write that story. I've always wanted to be a writer. So, even when I was in the math years, teaching math, I've always been working on the writing piece, but the question is, what would I write?

And I've actually written lots of different things in the past, but I remember I was actually proctoring a calculus exam, and I was just looking out at my students. I was on a computer, and I started Googling

picture books and trying to find out information about what it was like to write picture books. And, I found out that the illustrator and the writer didn't have to be the same person.

And, that was this, I didn't know that. So, I suddenly thought, 'oh, this whole world'; it opened to me this world that I've always loved. And then I started thinking very seriously about turning this story that I knew I was going to write in some form into a picture book.

And then I had children and really discovered this whole world of picture book biography through my children, and knew that that's the form it would take. So yes, that's how it began. And then, I kind of fell in love with picture book biographies as a genre.

GP: So, we're going to talk about all of the three biographies, because I think they're all really unique and interesting, each in their own way. But given that Flying Paintings is the one that's most immediately out or most recently out, why don't we start there? Can you tell us a little bit about what inspired you to write this specific story?

AA: So, the Zhou Brothers have this amazing art studio center on the south side of Chicago in Bridgeport. And on the third Friday of every month, they have an Open House; and they just invite the people of Chicago, free to come into this amazing building and see not only their gallery on the first floor where they also have like cafe and a little bookstore, but all of the galleries and studios for the artists who are in residence there. It's really an amazing--

I talk to a lot of the artists there; it's an amazing place for these artists because they don't take-- They might take a tiny commission for any art that's sold, but almost nothing compared to what you would get if you were exhibiting in a gallery. So, the artists get a wonderful deal there. And then, they also get studio space. So, you get to walk through all of these amazing places; an incredibly inspiring experience.

There's often somebody out in front with a chainsaw, like making an ice sculpture or a wood sculpture; and it's a party as well as an art event. So anyway, I was attending these; and one time I sat down in their cafe and pulled out their catalog, and just was summing through it. I came across this statement that I'm now paraphrasing. I've read it in different forms in different places. But the gist of it was that people think collaboration is about harmony, but they're wrong.

And, this is one of the Zhou Brothers speaking. He says, "They're wrong. Collaboration is not about harmony. You make something beautiful, and somebody comes along and destroys it. And, you have to find a way to go on together." I was just stunned by that statement. I thought what a profound statement, not only about the artistic process, but about relationships between people.

So, I immediately saw that as a statement about the relationship between these brothers who paint collaboratively; and then also a statement about being a person within a nation because they grew up during the Cultural Revolution and they couldn't have suffered more as a family, as a result of that revolution. And yet, they never lost their love; their deep abiding love for China; and even for Mao, that's a very interesting story as well, but they still love their country.

And, I thought, 'wow, they are telling us; they're giving us a way forward. If you could take those three strands and turn it into a story for children, what a powerful thing?' So, that was just-- That totally inspired me. And then, honestly, I set it aside for a really long time. And then after the 2016 election, there was just this moment where I thought, 'this is what we need. We need a way to go forward.' And, I saw it in that story.

GP: I love it. So, can you tell us a little bit about how those three strands, like the art collaboration, the personal relationships, and then also sort of love of country and like that push and pull that they experience with China; like, how they are intertwined in the story in the book?

AA: Yeah. So, the very first thing that happens, the older brother is born; is there at the beginning and he is only one brother. And, he's not even a brother yet. So, very opening lines, you get this sense that there's something coming, right? His full identity hasn't yet befallen, [laughs] befallen, or he hasn't come into it. That makes it sound like your identity just happens to you. But, in some sense, there are the givens of your life.

And so he hasn't come into that relationship that is going to define his life; this brother, this relationship of being a brother. So, but in that initial time in his life, when he's alone, he's hearing these stories from his extremely important grandmother who he called Po Po. And, she's telling him all of these stories of violence because her bookstore had been burned down to the ground or destroyed: once it had been looted and damaged, and the other time it had been burned; and she built it up twice, she was this incredible entrepreneurial, strong woman: very rare figure at that time.

And, he realizes that the world is a beautiful and terrible place. So, he first has this understanding of the world, and it's that dual quality. Next, his brother is born; and the stories of his little brother. So, his brother cried constantly to the point where he could barely stand it, he'd have to run away and hide. So, he sees his brother, and he immediately knows having a brother is a beautiful and terrible thing as well.

And then, later, when he's doing art, there is this double awareness that happens. First, there's just the pain of having to do art. His grandmother, you know, made them do this copying and learn calligraphy, learn this traditional form of Chinese art. And, there was the constant fighting with his brother, like kicking his brother under the table, et cetera. But then their family loses the bookstore, loses the ability to do this art.

All of the books are burned; and he realizes that art too is a beautiful and terrible thing. And so we have those three strands that come together, and those will form their art. It will be that awareness of beauty and terror, the awful and the good that the wonders and the tragic that come together to form their art, and their artistic consciousness.

GP: And, the Zhou Brothers, they illustrated the book as well. Can you talk a little bit about how that will, because I mean, we get to see their art on the pages of the book. For me, I'll be honest; I hadn't been exposed to their art until I read the book; and, I mean, it's really phenomenal.

AA: Yeah, it's really-- Okay, so it's amazing. I don't know if you happen to lift up the dust cover and look at the actual book, but what you'll see there is one of their real paintings, the paintings that they do as the Zhou Brothers. They're not representational artists. They have a few pieces early on in their career that are more representational, but, by and large, they're abstract painters. So, they read the story that I wrote, and they were enamored of the story.

It was a revelation to them that they could reach out to children. They're very much about bringing their art to the world, bringing art to the world, encouraging new artists, but they hadn't made that connection that they could be reaching children. And, they were thrilled at that idea.

But from the very beginning, I said to them, "Look, you're not illustrators, there's no expectation here that you would illustrate," because I was scared that would turn them off of the project. So, that was not part of the deal. And, when I took it to Candlewick, you know, they accepted the book; we

signed all the contracts, the Zhou Brothers signed the-- Oh, sorry, they didn't sign the contracts. They were the subject. So, I signed the contract, everything was done.

And then the older Zhou brother, his son, Michael is kind of their manager. And, Michael contacts me and he says, "Now, wait a minute. We can't just have anybody illustrating our story." And, I thought, "Oh no, we've already signed our rights away on this." So, I got together with Michael, I brought him like 50 picture book biographies and we went through them; so he could kind of find a style that seemed good for the family, good for his father and his uncle.

And funny, it was very strange, but out of this stack of books, he picked out another book by the illustrator for one of my other books; I didn't even tell him it was him, but it was the person who illustrated The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity. And he had, I had the book Float; and he picked that out and said, "I love this style." So, we can't get him. [laughs] He's very busy right now.

So, we kind of got a sense of style, but then a week later, he sends me these two paintings by the Zhou Brothers and he said, "We want to illustrate it." And honestly, I was mildly horrified because I thought, 'there is no possible way that Candlewick is going to bring on these abstract painters to illustrate a children's book. But if they don't, then the project is dead because now they want to do it.' So, I made a big pitch to Candlewick, and they were overjoyed.

They were thrilled. And, I really give them credit for taking that risk. I mean, in some sense, it's a great gift to get these world-class painters to illustrate, but they aren't illustrators. They weren't really sure what would happen.

And, what we see is, this incredible painting that start representational and then start to move into this form that really is their art. So, we get that story that nobody else could have brought to this. So, I was just thrilled. They painted their story from the knowledge of their, talk about own voices.

GP: Yeah.

AA: This is like own voices and then-- I was just-- I couldn't have been more thrilled that they took it on.

GP: I love that. And yeah, it really does have that sort of-- I mean, even the sort of containments of the illustrations. Like, at first, the way the text is on the page, all I can remember, I actually have the book right in front of me. I actually don't have the one with the dust jacket because I got a really early girlie version.

AA: Oh, okay.

GP: Now I'm going to have to go out and get a version with the dust jacket, because I really want to see this.

AA: Right.

GP: But, like, you know, in the beginning we have like frames around some of the pages; and the pictures are, like you said, a lot more representational; and then paintings start to sort of break out of the frames as they get older. And eventually, we get like these broad sweeping spreads of like, you know, just these abstract, but, sort of, still representational with the mountains and the cave paintings. And, it's just really spectacular.

AA: Thank you. Yeah, I agree. I was stunned because one of the things that I'd seen a lot with the Zhou Brothers is that kind of iconic image of the red figure dancing, which has come into a lot of their

paintings and was directly influenced by those paintings that were on the cliffs. And, when I turned-- When I saw that first painting of the baby, which is the first brother, ShanZuo--

GP: Yeah.

AA: When I saw that little baby with his arm up, I thought, 'oh my goodness, that's that figure; that's him, and he's going to emerge from this child into this eventual-- He's going to break into this freedom that they find through their art.' And again, there's no way any other artist could have understood that. And, they were planning to have a Chinese illustrator for the book, but still nobody could have done it the way they could have from the depth of their life experience.

GP: I love it. So, you mentioned that they-- You know, obviously, they read the book before you pitched it or like went to Candlewick; before you signed the contract, at least. Can you talk a little bit about that process? Because my guess is like, it's a delicate thing to write a biography, particularly, when the subjects are still living.

AA: Yes, yes. I wrote it almost as a poem. Like, almost as something, as I told you, that I needed to do for myself. But, of course, if it was going to become a book in the world, it had to have the blessing of these living artists. And, I actually feel that very deeply when I do any picture book biography, you cannot write about somebody who either; I mean, if they're living, you have to get their blessing.

But if they're not living, you really need to get the blessing of the people who have cared, who have tended their estate, who have spent their lives working on their lives, right? So, there are always those figures. And, to me, it is essential. I know, not every author feels this way, but I have set aside projects because I wasn't able to do that. So I knew that I had to reach the Zhou Brothers themselves.

I had some artist friends who had connections, and I was able to get right to them. I sent them the text and then we arranged this meeting, and it was really intimidating because they are these world-class artists. You know, Obama commissioned them to make a painting to gift the then president of China. And, they're also these abstract artists, so I sort of felt like here I am, just this nerdy little writer going and meeting like Chuck Palahniuk or something, right?

So, that was-- It was very-- I was very nervous. One of the brothers came and then his nephew came with him; so, not both of the brothers. And, we just sat down and talked about the text; and it was very gratifying because he loved it. And again, I could see it being this revelation to him that his story could open to children, but there was one thing he asked me to change; and this was so fascinating.

He really made no comments on the text in terms of altering it, except for this one thing. So, I had this-- There's this moment when the older brother has to go away to this re-education camp, and he's not allowed to paint anything except portraits of Chairman Mao. And so I said, "He was, still he was able to paint only the fat face of Chairman Mao." And, he said, he put his hand in his heart and he said, "Don't say fat face."

And, I said, "Why not? You know, Chairman Mao oppressed your family." And, he said, "No, but Mao was everything." I might have gasped. I was so stunned and so humbled by this relationship to an oppressive regime, or at least that was what I saw from the outside. And, he was saying, "No, that isn't-- That isn't the whole story.

There is this new way of being, this new way of thinking about being in the world that I received from Mao, and even an artistic sensibility that came partially through living through that time." And again, it went with that beautiful and terrible--

There was an embrace of life experience in that, that really taught me something deep and really played into what I had, not played into, but sort of underscored that idea of the beautiful and terrible that had already been in the book.

GP: That's fascinating. I love that and I love how, like-- So, I'm assuming you made the change--

AA: Yeah. [laughs]

GP: -and that it rippled out in the story, but I love that sort of deeper realization of it, you know, because a lot of times, I think, as writers; it can be, as you said, intimidating to get feedback on our work. And, feedback is a beautiful and terrible thing as well.

[laughter]

GP: And so I love how like, you know, you were able to shift something that could have been like a moment of angst and like, 'ah, like, what do you mean?'

AA: Yeah.

GP: To this moment of embracing too. So, it kind of underscores the theme of the book, so yay!

AA: Yeah. Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely.

GP: So, we could talk about this book all day, but I'd love to open up and expand our conversation to include your other picture book biographies as well. You also wrote The Strange Birds of Flannery O'Connor and The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity. Let's start with Flannery O'Connor since, you know, we're literary folks here.

AA: Yes.

GP: Talk a little bit about this book. Like, how did this happen? How did you embark on this project, and what was the process like?

AA: I have been a huge Flannery O'Connor fan for decades so I have read everything she's written; all of her short stories, all of her letters, all of her essays, a lot of criticism about her life. So, I've just sort of been a fan girl for quite a while, but there's one essay, in particular, she wrote called The King of the Birds that details this quest she has as a child to find the strangest, most beautiful bird.

And, when I read that story; and really after I started thinking in the vein of picture book biography, that story was with me, and I thought, 'what a beautiful metaphor for her quest to write the strangest, most beautiful story.' But it really didn't become a picture book biography in the form that it's in. I didn't really find the story until I started working in the archives.

And, you never know what you're going to find in archives, especially when you're looking for juvenilia; there could be almost nothing saved, there could be like one little childhood memento from school: you don't know. But when I went into the archives at Emory University and at Gcsu, there are folders and folders and folders of her work as a child.

So, she was a little avid author-illustrator when she was three, when she was five, when she was eight; she was already creating. When you go into the archives, you have this sense that you're

there with the person. Like, it's the feeling you get with a handwritten letter, right; that the soul of the person, the spirit of the person is somehow in the room with you. And, I thought this girl is also a strange bird; she is also part of her story.

So, I saw this Trinity forming between the birds and the stories and the girl. Once I had that; that was the story for me-- That was the-- It was bringing these strands together. I guess you can see sort of a pattern there, in the way I think about writing a picture book biography, because it was a similar re-stranded idea that I had for the Flying Paintings book that you also see here in Flying Paintings. I mean, sorry, in The Strange Birds of Flannery O'Connor; there's the flying that made me somehow connected to the birds in my mind, so yeah.

[laughter]

GP: So, let's talk a little bit about, you mentioned being in the archives. And, we get a set of her as this, you know, child author-illustrator doing all these really cool pictures and stories and whatnot. How did you go from that to weaving it into the narrative? I mean, this narrative spans her entire life. Like unlike the Zhou Brothers, obviously, because they're still living, or even The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity, where it kind of ends when he embarks on the journey to really launch his mathematical career.

AA: Right.

GP: This book actually, like is a true, almost, beginning to end. We don't see infancy, but we see young childhood until she dies. So, how did you weave that nugget of juvenilia to this broad-sweeping story?

AA: That's such a good question. So, one of the things that I've sort of discovered about what interests me in picture book biographies through writing this series of picture book biographies is what I'm really after is seeing the beginnings of somebody, seeing the origins. When you're writing a picture book biography, you're writing a biography of somebody who is amazing, right?

Somebody who's a genius or this incredible, that has these incredible accomplishments behind them. And, that is a really intimidating, and, in some ways, off-putting place for a child to enter a story; really for anybody to enter a story. And so I'm always, and the truth is that those are somehow accidental, right? They would've still been an incredible person without that public recognition.

So, what I want to do is to go back into the childhood and find that adult already forming. So, I've really come to the belief, not only through writing these stories, but thinking about my own life and witnessing my children develop, that we begin life with fascinations that will carry us into that future. And, if you're lucky enough to be able to pursue your vocation through your life, you'll be able to trace it back to your earliest days.

And so for Flannery O'Connor, I think finding-- What I was locating in her childhood was not some sort of realm that is cut off from her adulthood, which then I think would be really hard to bring together. Or it would seem just sort of episodic; like, here she was young and now she's older.

But what I was really looking for and found: was this woman already present, already in full bloom; already her wit, her dark vision, her humor, her sarcasm, all of that was alive when she was very small. It's probably the most affirming of that vision that I have, experience that I've had in writing these biographies; just because her parents, her mother preserved so much of her childhood, and I can see it there.

GP: Yeah. And, you know, I love what you said about how, you look at their childhood and try to uncover the adult that's already developing there, because, particularly-- I don't know, there's something meta about that because these are picture books.

So, the people who are reading or for whom these books have been crafted are also children whose adults are forming within them. So, like, there's this kind of Meta element that like a kid might pick up Flying Paintings or Strange Birds and see themselves in that character in some way. And, that could potentially shape the forming adult outside, at the other end.

AA: I really think that's my hope more than anything else in picture book biographies, because, you know, maybe somebody's going to read a story about a mathematician and they're not going to end up being a mathematician.

But it's that seriousness, that honoring of childhood; that their work is really already starting, that the things they're fascinated by, really matter. And, they're going to mean something later in their lives. So, it's not-- I think a lot of people have a sense that childhood doesn't matter.

I mean, it's a way that people have, I think, a falsely honoring childhood of sort of carving this space around it and saying, "This is childhood. You can do whatever you want now. It all is just play and freedom." Which is all true, but there's this serious core to that. There's this serious aspect of that, that all of that play actually matters.

And, it's reflecting these early questions, these early drives and fascination; and you won't be able to see it until later, you won't be able to know what it means until that person has grown up, right, and until it's sort of taken hold and they've launched themselves in a particular path. Then you'll be able to look back and say, "Yes, I see it. I see-- I see it forming."

GP: Oh my gosh, that resonates with me so much. So, my kids who are at the moment six and eight are both in Montessori School. I don't know if you're familiar with Montessori, but it's this whole idea of like, they don't call it school; it's work. Like, the kids have to work.

AA: It's work, yes. I love that about Montessori.

GP: I know, right? But there is something very earnest about it and that it does take that element of childhood very seriously that like, 'yeah, the kid is playing with dolls, but that is work. They are working with those dolls; it's not play, they are working.' You know, that to me, is so, like you said; it honors that element of childhood that does eventually impact later in adulthood. And it's just-- Yeah, I can see that thread in all three of the books in the picture of biographies.

AA: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I see that so much in my kids. Like, I was just going to offer one little example from my son's life; when he was two, three, he used to make Stores obsessively, but like a lot of kids play Store. We didn't think anything of it. We were just like, of course, kids play Store, but he played it obsessively, and with determination and purpose and seriousness; and continued to play it, he played it--

He made this huge game with all of their friends that became this ongoing Store game that spanned years. And, now at 13, he's still that kid, it's turned into this desire to be an entrepreneur. He is very obsessed with business and sort of the creativity of that, but it's never stopped. Like, he still has that core of obsession. I just love it. It's amazing to me. It's amazing to see that in your children developing.

GP: And, I think as writers too, it's fascinating to look back on our own childhoods and see those nuggets of who we are today. Like, one of the things that I was obsessed with as a child and am still obsessed with is theme parks.

AA: Oh, wow!

GP: I'm completely, fully obsessed with the idea of crafting this 360-degree experience--

AA: Wow.

GP: -for other people to the point where when I was 12 or 13, I designed a ride for Disney World. Like I designed it, like in my, you know, some kids go to summer camp; I sat around and went to the library and researched like--

AA: That's awesome. [laughs]

GP: -ride design, basically.

AA: Right.

GP: And, you know, it got rejected. They were like, "We don't take unsolicited submissions. Go away," 13 year old--

AA: You actually sent it. [laughs]

GP: But I sent it to the CEO.

[laughter]

GP: Like, not just anyone at Disney, like I sent it to the CEO. And, some poor assistant in their office; read it, and had to like send a nice, you know, decline letter. But the funny part is like now at DIY MFA, the way I describe what we do is we create theme parks for people's brains--

AA: That is amazing.

GP: -so that thread still carries over. And, it's still like a core element of work I do today. So like, I love hearing-- What nuggets do you see from your childhood that have come to play in your work now?

AA: You know, that's a great question. I've been thinking about this a lot recently because, in some sense, I always wanted to be a writer, so that is consistent. And yet, I never, ever wrote. I think that's a story that needs to be out there more because usually when writers talk about their childhood, they were always writing stories, right? And so you think, 'oh gosh, can I really even be a writer?'

Because I wasn't that kid, but I always wanted to write and I have these boxes of empty diaries, basically. I couldn't even write diaries. I'd write a couple entries, but they'd largely be empty. And yet, I was always imagining and I needed solitude more than I think a lot of kids did. I have this tree that is sort of like my mythic, like a myth from my life is this tree that I would climb and I'd sit up at the top of it.

And, it was so important to me to have that tree. And, a lot of times I would read up there. I would just look out at the world and feel and think. I didn't know this at the time, but that was really me forming

my imagination; my writer's imagination or my poetic imagination. That was what was happening, and that was why I was doing it. And, I can look back and see that now.

And then later, I remember I had this experience that I always think about; in high school, I wrote this essay on Macbeth called The Yin and Yang of Macbeth. I was reading the I Ching and Macbeth at the same time. And, I remember, my English professor who I loved, really, I think did a disservice to me, at the time. And, he laughed at it, and he said, "This is--" It was ridiculous, but, he said, "This is ridiculous."

I mean, there's a natural connection between these two things, but if he'd have a little bit more insight, I think if he thought a little bit more, that what you're fascinated by is leading somewhere, that he would realize that I was in the early stages of being a metaphor maker. And, that what I was doing was saying, this is like that. And, I wasn't doing anything profound. It was a silly sort of superficial connection.

I wasn't ringing any sort of deep vision there, but obviously, there was, you know, an inclination in that direction. So, I think it really, when you're a teacher, you really have to go forward with fear and trembling because what you have before you are people that have these serious drives and you need to be tender with them. You need to like try to be insightful and see--

I remember I had this professor that when she was in graduate school, somebody realized she was a poet and that was a great gift to her. So, a teacher can do that as well. They looked at her writing and they said, "You're not a fiction writer. You're a poet." And, to her, that was this; she became a poet. She became an amazing poet, and it was just this gift for somebody to see that in her.

GP: So, I love that you went in this direction of like teachers and the influence of teachers because The Boy Who Dreamed of Infinity, teachers have pretty negative influences; like, we've got a lot of people trying to quash this boy's, you know, genius.

AA: Right.

GP: Can you talk a little bit about this boy? I know this book has a particular special connection to you; so I'd love to hear the story and have you share the story of, how you came to write it and sort of where this book came from?

AA: Well, it's interesting, I think those two things actually really go hand-in-hand because-- So, it's both about how one comes to love something like mathematics, even in spite of what's happening in school, but it's also my backstory. So, when I was a very little girl, five years old, my father was a mathematician. He was in England. We were all in England, and we were staying with this woman in mathematics.

She's an early woman in mathematics that actually says on her tombstone, "Computer Pioneer"; but she was a living link back to Ramanujan because her teachers had been young during his time at Cambridge. And so she mentioned to my father that some of these teachers of hers had their estate papers kept at the Wren Library Trinity College, which is where Ramanujan went. So, my father thought he might as well take a look at these boxes and see what was there.

So, at the time, nobody was thinking about Ramanujan's life, but my father had written his PhD dissertation on the same thing that Ramanujan had been doing when he died. So, when my father opened one of these boxes and saw these handwritten pages that were talking about the same thing, it's called them mock theta functions; he realized what he was seeing. He realized that this was the work that Ramanujan had done on his deathbed.

And it then became known as 'the lost notebook of Ramanujan'. So, I heard that story from a very young age, and I saw my father going back and forth to India. I heard about Ramanujan's life, all of my life. And not only that, but my father was really a vocational mathematician, a passionate mathematician. And, I felt that passion swirling around our house; like, numbers were out there, formulas were out there.

And then, beside that, I had school mathematics that was board tears. I really hated math in school. I was fairly competent at it, but I just, I found no joy in it; no creativity. So, if you're a creative person, often school mathematics will not appeal to you because it is a book with the answers at the back. There's no creativity in that. I mean, it's just; you are trying to get what somebody else already knows. And the sad thing is, no relationship to what mathematics is actually like when you get to that research level.

GP: I want to interject because that completely resonates with my own experience as well. And, like, I actually don't call math at school, 'math', I call it 'arithmetic', because that's not--

AA: Oh, good.

GP: -because it's not mathematics. It's just adding and subtracting. It's what, you know, calculators can do. I was that kid in high school, like you have that great video on YouTube, like, you know, looking at the clock. I was that kid, looking at the clock and being like, 'why do we have to do this if I could just punch numbers into a calculator? Isn't there more interesting math out there?' And yeah. So, go on. Tell me more about Ramanujan.

AA: Yeah. No, that's exactly, exactly right. I think of my three books as being three books about artists, even though--

GP: Mm-hmm. Math is art.

AA: Even though you don't think that for the math. Right, math is art; and people do not realize that. Ramanujan was-- So, people always say to me, like, "How do you do math and writing? That's the logical side of your brain and the creative side of your brain; I don't really get it." And, to me, they're really of a piece.

GP: Yeah.

AA: I mean, they are the-- It's the same sort of process. I've actually learned a lot from mathematicians about writing. I'm actually just taking a little tangent here. There's this wonderful mathematician, Maryam Mirzakhani, who died tragically at age 40. She's the only woman to ever have won the Fields Medal. But she describes her mathematical process like this. She says, she assembles an odd cast of characters, and then tries to get them talking to each other.

[laughter]

AA: I love that. And, she wanted to be a writer when she was young. So I think, okay, so that consciousness is there; it's the same sort of thing. But anyway, going back to Ramanujan's story; so, when he was a little boy, he just loved numbers. He loved them on his own. It might have partially a gift from his mother because she was an incredibly mathematically-minded person that used to play this game of strategy together.

So, very early on, he loved that puzzle-making. But I think it was even earlier than that in the family record books, there's just a few little things about him. And, one of them is that he loved to line-up the copper pots across the floor. And, that was before; he was a late-talker. He didn't speak until he was three, but he still loved to do that. With my idea that, you're already becoming who you will someday be, I see that moment as meaning something.

It was that he was already fascinated by patterns. It was already forming in him; this love of pattern, of number; and then he just sort of goes with that through his life. And, fortunately for him, the love is so intense that it persists even through school mathematics. He hated school so much, he would run away and he would get in trouble in school; and they'd make him sit in the corner.

And then he actually flunked out of college because he was so passionate about mathematics that that was just sort of commanding all of his energies. And, it's really a quandary for teachers because mathematics is really hard, and you do need to learn a lot to be able to work at mathematics at a high level.

And so teachers are not wrong to try to get kids to learn arithmetic. I mean, it's really, really, really important. I think to go along with that, there needs to be these little sparks; these moments where you break into this more creative side of math, so children can see what it's all for. You know, that it's not just for this drudgery.

GP: I completely agree. In fact, I can share an anecdote of the moment; that moment for me was in ninth grade, where I was in-- So, I was the kid who was like the slow one at math, but then--

AA: Yeah.

GP: -you know, and like you get these labels in math classes that you don't get in like English class or history, but like, you know, if you're in math, you can be too slow if you don't compute the answers fast enough. And, I remember in ninth grade Geometry, we finished the unit a couple of days before winter break. And so the teacher needed to fill time so he started teaching us Non-Euclidean geometry. And, for me--

AA: Wow.

GP: -that like-- You know, like really fundamental, basic stuff. Like, 'this is what a hyper, you know, a hyperbole looks like. This is what elliptical space looks like.'

AA: Right.

GP: But the thing that clicked for me was when I realized that all the rules that held true on a flat plane were no longer true on a hyperbolic plane or an elliptical plane. And, that moment of realizing that like, 'wait, if math rules that are the rules that everyone is like-- I mean, one plus one is two. If that suddenly, you take it into a new context and it's no longer true, what else is no longer true when you change the context?'

And, if you apply that like to life, that's actually a really profound discovery to get when you're a teenager, you know, to be like, 'wait a minute. All the things people are telling me, if I put them in a different context will suddenly not be true.' And, it opened my mind to question so many things in later high school, which I probably wouldn't have thought to question, had I not had those like two days of Non-Euclidean geometry.

AA: Yeah. That is amazing. One of the things I loved that you said at the start of this was that you were slow at math.

[laughter]

AA: And, that is a really big-- I mean, honestly, I would say a lot of the best mathematicians in the world are slow thinkers. I know of this one story of a mathematician, I won't say his name in case it would embarrass him, but, you know, rose to the level of the Chair of a Department at one of the top universities in the country; he tested himself because he was having problems with one of his children who needed to be tested. So, he tested himself, he was in the lowest ninth percentile for processing speed--

[laughter]

AA: -which just amazes me. So, I feel-- I always tell my math students that like, slow is good. Like, if you need extra time in the test, take it; you know, like that slow is leading you somewhere deep. But then I also just love that idea, and that's one of the things math should be doing for us, right? It should be teaching us how to break out of our assumptions, which would be incredibly useful as creative people in general. So yes; yes, math should definitely be doing that.

GP: Exactly. I think that's where, you know, I love bringing the fields and the disciplines of math and writing together because like you, I also think the two things go hand-in-hand. I remember in college, I took a lot of math classes, and there was always a very-- It wasn't just about getting to the end result. It was the elegance of the argument.

AA: Yeah.

GP: Like, you could write an elegant paper and you could also write an elegant proof. And, those two things intermeshed like that logic of the thought process can be beautiful.

AA: Yes, definitely. Another thing for me is learning about working within formal constraints. So, sort of, to bring this back to the picture book biography, I fell in love with poetry long before I ever was writing picture book biographies. And I think that early on, one of the things I loved about poetry, were those formal constraints. There's this amazing book called A Poet's Guide to Poetry by Mary Kinzie.

And, at the end of that book, there's just these incredible poetry exercises. And, each one will be something like this, she'll say, "Okay, write a poem that has four-line stanzas that has an ABAB Rhyme Scheme, and an iambic pentameter, and then uses a certain number of Swedish long words. And, it also has to be about--- And, then she'll give you the subject for you to think, 'wow, this like impossibly constrained environment that you have to work in.

But then you find that that constrained environment produces things that you could never have imagined. It produces, the way the Zhou Brothers would put it, a new magic comes out of that. So, it's sort of a way of tricking yourself into creativity, which I think as creatives, we really need. I mean the blank page, blank canvas; the blank page is such an intimidating thing. So, you need these methods for tricking yourself into entering it.

I think those formal constraints operate that way for me. And so if you think about the form of a picture book biography, you have like 32 pages, 48 pages, you have a life that you have to work with and you have a very low word count. And, it's like maybe having a mansion versus a tiny house,

right? When you're at a tiny house, you have to be wildly creative. When you have a mansion, you can, you know, do anything.

You can keep all your stuff, you can put everything. There's room for everything, you know, but in a tiny house, you have to be so inventive, so creative. And, it really-- You have to think, what really is essential? It feels the same way to me writing a picture book biography. So mass poetry, tiny houses, picture book biography is all the same thing.

GP: I wholeheartedly agree. I love this idea what you said about the constraints; and like how in many ways, no constraints is more burdensome than adding constraints because when you have that freedom of like; you could write anything, then you write nothing.

[laughter]

AA: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

GP: So, I feel like we could keep talking about this all day, but I'd love to hear what's coming up next to you. I know have a YA project in the works, and then you might have some other things that you want to share with our listeners.

AA: So, I was asked to write a chapter by Candlewick from a book they called 1789. It's actually the second in the series. The first was 1968, and it's by Marc Aronson and Susan Campbell, Bartoletti; they're the editors. So, it's a chapter in this book. It was the year of the French Revolution. It was also the year of the ratification of the American constitution; and it's about the enlightenment.

So, I remember when they gave me the assignment, there were all of these pieces. It was, "Okay. So, we want you to write about this Slovenian mathematician who discovered 140 digits of Pi (π) in the year 1789. We'd also like you to talk about the history of Pi (π), and we'd also like you to make that talk to the enlightenment and what it means to be a person." [laughs] So, it's exactly my kind of project--

[laughter]

AA: -wild, wild constraint. So, I took it on and-- Anyway, so that chapter is coming out in September; and I'm really excited about it. I'm really excited for Pi Day, the following year, March 14th, which is Pi Day 3.14, when I can bring this to schools and talk about Pi (π) and the history of Pi (π), et cetera. So, that's coming out, but then I'm also starting--

I'm also doing all of this work that's sort of offshoots from my current books. So, one of the things I'm really excited about is when I was in the archives, doing all this work on Flannery O'Connor, I realized that nothing had really ever been done on her juvenilia.

So, I proposed to the Emery folks that we do an exhibition on Flannery O'Connor's juvenilia; and originally, it was going to be called Imagining Flannery; both people imagining Flannery and her as an imagining being. But it is morphed into this much bigger project now, because, at the same time I was proposing that, another team of people were proposing an exhibit on Benny Andrews, who is this amazing black American artist.

He's dead now, but his paintings now hang in The Museum of Modern Art in New York. And, he grew up 30 miles down the road from Flannery O'Connor, at the same exact time. And, when he was-- Somewhere in the 2000s; he, as an old man, he decided to illustrate one of her stories, Everything

That Rises Must Converge. And, as a black man deciding to illustrate a white woman who lived before 1950, a story of hers; was a big decision.

And so he wrote this gorgeous essay about that decision, about what it meant for him to be doing this. At this time in our history as a nation, to have this exhibit that brings these two figures together-- And, he has this beautiful line where he says that he looked into her work even though she grew up-- She was in the racist south, and he never would've been invited to her house, et cetera. He looked into her work and found revelations.

And, at the very end of the essay, he says, "We are at a crossroads; and it's for the reviewer to come and look, and wonder, and wonder some more." So, I'm just-- I'm so excited about this exhibit. We're just in long conversation; it's coming somewhere in the future in the next year or two years. So, that's commanding a lot of my time. And then, I think I've used it my time in talking about that.

[laughter]

GP: I love it. I mean, it's such, such an important and timely theme for an exhibit too. So, hopefully, all the COVID stuff that is happening will simmer down at some point, and we'll be able to have exhibits again, and then--

AA: Yes.

GP: Yeah, because that sounds amazing.

AA: Which is what we're kind of waiting on. Yeah, exactly.

GP: Awesome. Well, I always like to end with the same question. I feel like there were so many nuggets of wisdom already in this interview, but I have to ask you, what's your number one tip for writers?

AA: All right. So, my tip is actually going to be a book recommendation; and this is for the non-fiction writers out there, but really it's for any writers: it's called The situation and the story by Vivian Gornick. A lot of people don't know this book, but it is really, it's not your typical writing manual. It's not really a manual on craft, but she sends this beautiful thing. So, I want to just give you this little quote and then I'll give you the tip.

So, she says, "Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance; sometimes, the plot. The story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer; the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say." I love that she associates story with that. We so often associate story with plot; like beginning, middle, and end, what happens.

And, I love that she says this because for me, especially as a writer, I had no idea how to write until I located that connection to my material, that emotional experience. I remember spending fruitless hours in a library with this manual called What If trying to do these fiction exercises, all about setting and dialogue and character development. None of it did anything at all for me as a writer because I had no connection to my material.

And if you don't have that, you won't be able to write anything; but when you have it, everything comes-- It's this organic process. Like the structure comes out of that, the order, the metaphor, the expressiveness, the texture; everything starts to build out of that. So, I would say, read that book and then find a way through meditation; through whatever, to connect with your material.

And, if you're having a hard time writing, it's not because you're not a writer; the fact that you want to write means you're a writer, it's that you haven't yet connected with that depth that needs to, you haven't yet believed that that's important, that stuff that's inside of you.

GP: Oh, my gosh; such, such good advice. And, I have a new book to read. I hadn't heard of that book yet, so yay! I'm super excited. It's not often I get the--

AA: And, it's short. It's really short. [laughs]

GP: I like-- This is a treat. I have a very extensive Writing Books library at this point; and this one's new to me, so yay! Thank you for that.

AA: Yay! You're welcome. [laughs]

GP: Well, Amy, it has been such a delight speaking with you today. Thank you so much for being here on the show.

AA: Thank you so much for having me. It has been a wonderful conversation.

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