



Janae Marks

288: Find Your Community

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/288 because it's Episode 288. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and you know, all the places, and leave us a review. This will help other Word Nerds out there discover the show as well.

Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing Janae Marks. Janae is an award-winning children's book author living in Connecticut. She has an MFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in Writing for Children and Young Adults from The New School.

And she is an active member of the Society of Children's Books Writers and Illustrators, or as we all love and know this organization – SCBWI. Her debut is a middle grade novel titled *From the Desk of Zoe Washington*, and we're going to be discussing that today.

Now, what you might not know about Janae is that she also happens to be one of my dearest writing besties. She's known me since before DIY MFA was even a twinkle in my eye, like back when it was still just a "crazy idea", I was kicking around on my personal blog. She and I were also in the same thesis critique group so she has seen my writing in all its many forms: from the good, to the bad, to the OMG, Gabriela... what the heck were you thinking?

One of my favorite things—the thing that brings true joy to my heart—is when I get to introduce my favorite people, like Janae, to the word nerd community. I've known Janae for a long time; I know how much of her heart and soul she's poured into this book, and I am so super excited for the world to discover *Zoe Washington* and this sweet, heart-felt middle grade novel.

Without further ado, welcome Janae! It is so great to have you here.

Janae Marks: Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

GP: I'm just so excited. I'm so excited to have you on the show. I mean like, do you remember when we were in the MFA program; and we were like, "Someday, we'll get published." And now, like, OMG, we're here. This is so cool.

JM: I know. It's very exciting, very exciting.

GP: So, so much fun. So, I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story. What inspired you to write *From the Desk of Zoe Washington*, and why?



JM: So, at the time, this was in early 2016, I was trying to think of what I wanted to write next, after having written three prior Young Adult novels. And I think a lot of other people might remember the time when Serial, the podcast was really popular.

And basically, that was a-- It's a True Crime podcast. The first season was, and they basically told a story of a man who's in prison currently; and there was sort of a underlying theme of he might not have actually committed the crime. And around that time also, was Making a Murderer documentary on Netflix.

And so, I was watching these things and listening to these things, and kind of becoming really intrigued with the idea of these wrongful convictions. And I don't know, just kind of, it was in the back of my mind.

And so, I started thinking, 'What would happen or what is it like to be a child of somebody in this position? What if any of these characters or these people from these stories that I was following, had children who were back home not knowing whether their parent was going to get out of prison for something that they didn't actually do?'

So, that kind of got my wheels turning, and I kind of came up with the idea of writing a story from the perspective of a child of an incarcerated parent, who might actually be innocent of his crime; and that's how Zoe Washington was born.

GP: Wow. That is such a great angle to think about it; in sort of thinking about it from a kid's perspective, and how a kid would experience something like that – really powerful.

So, you touched on something that I wanted to talk about, which is that you'd written YA before; and like when you and I were in the same, you know, writing groups and same thesis group, you were working on YA. And obviously, this is a departure from that; this is a middle grade novel.

Now, middle grade and YA have a lot in common, but there are also some key differences. Can you talk a little bit about making that shift, sort of, like, why you chose middle grade as opposed to YA?

Like the story could have been a YA, like a teenage daughter of someone who was incarcerated, but you deliberately chose a middle grade-aged character. And then, also, some of the things that do cross over from one age group to the other.

JM: Yeah, so, actually, fun fact about this book, when I started writing the first draft, I actually intended this to be a Young Adult novel; and I had Zoe as a teenage character, but I had a really astute critique partner, at the time, who we were--

We decided to swap chapters with each other, sort of, early on in the process; I was basically trying to get myself motivated to finish this draft. I had just had my daughter a few months earlier; and so, it was kind of getting back on the horse after taking some time off from writing. So, it was nice to have this accountability partner.

And so, as we were swapping chapters, as I was writing the first draft, she came back to me with some minor notes saying, "Hmm, I really like this. But the way that the story is going, it sounds like it could be more of a middle grade character than YA. I think just based on the fact that, you know, in the very first chapter, we have Zoe receiving a letter and it's just a lot of talking about her relationship with her dad or this relationship that she's trying to now explore with her dad through these letters. It sounded more like it could be more suitable for a younger protagonist."



And so, I decided to take her advice and just try it out, and as I started shifting it-- And it was lucky that I got this feedback when I was still writing the first draft, so I kind of switched gears right away. And yeah, I realized like, she was right.

I think this definitely could have been a Young Adult novel, but I think there's something about the maturity level of teenagers that might have made it a little bit tougher because I think one of the things about the story is that Zoe is sort of getting to know the world – and is becoming exposed to things, the realities of the world. She's not yet jaded yet. She doesn't really know.

And so, getting exposed to the idea that somebody could be innocent while in prison, this is like the first time-- You know, like she's not been exposed to this concept much. You know, it's not something that her parents were talking about with her even though it's a very common thing.

So, I think at her age, is more believable that she might not understand. And it kind of gave me the opportunity to let her learn more about it and explore it in the story. And the readers who will be reading this, also might not know about it, you know, because they're also younger; and may not have been exposed to it yet.

So, I think just aging her down gave me the opportunity to let her be a little bit more naive about this topic and this concept of innocent people being in prison.

GP: That's such a great insight. I mean, in a way, there's a certain innocence in the middle grade age group, like the world still has a lot of hopefulness even in the darkness. And you're right, teenagers and YA – there's a lot more angst, a lot more jadedness, a lot more like non-hopefulness.

JM: Exactly, yeah. Yeah. I think a teenage character, I don't know, at that point if they'd already kind of been exposed to a lot of the realities and the harshness of the world, even only a few years older, I think it might have been hard for them to take the same journey that Zoe ultimately took in this book because they might not have felt like there was hope. Like you said, they might have felt like it was worth it.

GP: Yeah, love it. So, you touched on this already, like, there are a couple of big issues at the core of this book, big themes and topics. One of them is the idea of wrongful incarceration – that Zoe's biological dad is in prison for a crime he says he didn't commit.

The other one is, of course, the issue of race; and how it plays into Zoe's life, and into her story. Can you talk a little bit about how these issues, kind of, obviously no spoilers, but how they play out in the story – and how you wove them in without letting them kind of derail the story or take all the attention away from Zoe herself?

JM: Yeah, so, I try to make it as subtle as possible. Obviously, once she finds out about, you know, the fact that her father might be innocent and she starts exploring more about the fact, the statistics--

She does a little bit of research, not too much, but there's like a couple of moments in the book where she talks about, you know, trying to find out more about this; and she talks to her grandmother about this, like the concept of systemic racism within the Criminal Justice System.

But I tried to keep those moments, not focus too much because I don't want to feel like I'm preaching to the reader and I don't want it to be too heavy. So, I tried to just focus more on, really like, her relationship with her father, and learning about all these things through that lens.

And so, it kind of ties it back into children and what they're interested in; and makes it more approachable because it's about a girl trying to get him know her dad through letters, you know?



And, in the midst of all of this, she's learning that he might be innocent; and in the midst of all that, she's kind of learning more about what this bigger world issue is.

So, I feel like, you know, I basically just tried to really focus really on her and her story within this; and not focus on the wider issue. I wasn't trying to explore the larger issue so much that, to take away from Zoe's story; ultimately, this is Zoe's story.

So, I really just wanted to bring it back to this smaller lens, and let her see little bits and pieces of it without getting too broad, you know; and just really focusing on her dad's story, and not on every injustice that's out there.

GP: Exactly. Like instead of globalizing and sort of making blanket statements, in a way, it's just as much stereotyping when we make blanket statements, whether it's negative or positive, right? Like, it's still a stereotype; it's still a globalization.

But by focusing it on Zoe's specific story, you're giving us all the nuances – and letting us see both the good and the bad and the complicated, and the things that are fair and unfair, and sort of everything together – that is the messy thing we call, life.

JM: Right. And I tried to also bring in other elements of her life – like she's also very much into baking, so that plays a part in the story. She has her, sort of, at the very beginning of the story, ex-best friend, Trevor, who she's having drama with.

And so, there's a lot of other elements in the plot that aren't just about the race and the injustice. It's also-- You know, it's just about a girl who has good things going on. So, I was trying to balance the light in the dark and, you know, the good and the bad in her life just because in reality, that's how it is for everybody.

GP: Absolutely. I mean, I love how, exactly what you said, like, "It's subtle and it's part of the story, but it doesn't overtake the story." And there are things that are sort of regular kid themes like fighting with your ex-best friend and things like that, that are, even kids who haven't had the experience of having a parent incarcerated, can relate to Zoe's experience of fighting with her friend, because that's something that kids have had in their lives, in some way.

JM: Yeah, it was definitely important to me to make this somewhat of a universal story so that, even if a kid has no experience with prison or with an incarcerated parent, they can still relate to her as a character and her as a middle grade, you know, an average 12-year-old girl in a lot of ways.

And you know, and then, it also gives the readers an opportunity to relate to her but also get a glimpse of this other part of her life; and then, there are the kids that do, that would really relate to it.

GP: Right.

JM: You know, and so I felt like it was nice to be able to have the opportunity to tell a story that's not been told too often in this genre, in this category, but also, you know, just tell a story that middle grade readers could just read and be entertained by. So, it's not only about learning about injustice; it's also just having fun watching Zoe bake cupcakes, you know, in a couple scenes.

GP: [laughs] Exactly. You know, one of the other things that I really loved is how like, oftentimes, you know, when we read children's literature, when you have like the kid who has biological parents who are divorced or separated, there's sort of like a taking of sides, right?



But in this case, like, she has a really good relationship with her stepdad. Like it's not an evil stepdad scenario; she's also trying to find her footing with her relationship with her dad.

So, it's not like dad is bad and stepdad is good; like, it's complicated, which is the way life usually is for children who are living in that situation. Can you talk a little bit about the family dynamics, and how they play into the story?

JM: Yeah, I really-- It was important to me to give her a really good positive family structure and not necessarily have it be where, you know, she has a stepfather that she hates because you learn early on, that this has been her stepfather since she was really young.

GP: Yeah.

JM: So, he's kind of—Although, you know, like, and up until this point, she really hasn't put too much thought until she receives a letter from her biological father.

She hasn't really spent much time thinking about him just due to the nature of, you know, the fact that she has this stepdad and the fact that her mom, sort of, just tried to keep her separate from all that. So, I really wanted her to just kind of have like a happy family dynamic.

And I also brought in the grandmother who, you know, I really enjoyed writing her character because she was able to kind of be that supportive person in her life, but also kind of be on her side a little bit when things get tough with her parent-- You know, if she's disagreeing with her mom, just have this other kind of parental figure who's almost like an ally when she needs it; and I liked that dynamic as well.

So yeah, I mean, I think a lot of people, like you said, I think there are kids who even if they have one parent who's not in their lives for any number of reasons, can relate to this idea of having a new blended family, and how-- I don't know, I just wanted to show a positive representation of that.

GP: Absolutely. And the fact that it is often nuanced, right?

JM: Right.

GP: Like, it's not usually the cut-and-dry fairytale evil stepmother that we see in like, you know, the Disney movies or something. Like, there is often layers to it; and it's often complicated, and kids can love both of their parents or stepparents or whoever, but then also recognize that those people may not get along with each other – and that's life.

JM:: Exactly. Yeah.

GP: So, well, shifting gears slightly to something completely different, cupcakes. You've mentioned cupcakes; and baking, obviously, is kind of a big thing in this story. It also gives it a sweet, both literally and figuratively, angle when there are some, you know, bigger heavier themes going on. Can you talk a little bit about the role of baking, and what it plays into in the story? Like, what does baking do for this narrative?

JM: So yes, I think, like you said, it adds some sweetness, a little bit of lightness and also kind of shows that Zoe is a regular kid, who even before her dad, her biological dad came back into her life, she had something that she was very excited about.

She had a passion, you know, Zoe is really passionate about baking. And in the very beginning of the book, we find out that she loves this show called Kids Bake Challenge; and it's a kids' baking show, and she really wants to get on it.



She finds out that she's eligible; and so, she asked her parents if she can audition and they say, "Well, we're not so sure if you're mature enough, if you have enough experience."

So, because her mother is friends with somebody who has their own cupcake shop in the Boston area – this is where this book takes place – she basically is able to get her into, like, a little one-day-a-week internship, where she's able to kind of just basically get more experience and show and prove to her parents that she has a maturity and can handle the responsibility of being on a show like this.

So yeah, so that's like a really big goal she has over the course of the book that kind of helps drive the story in addition to the mystery around her biological dad. And I think, yeah, just adds like some fun moments.

I mean, there are scenes where she's just baking and having fun; and there are scenes where, you know, she's at the internship, and things aren't going quite as she would like. And it just adds a little bit more fun to the story, where there's other moments that are a little bit more heavy.

GP: Absolutely. I mean, there's also so many things, like so many fiascos that potentially could happen in a kitchen; and so, there's room for humor in there as well.

JM: Exactly. Yeah.

GP: I love that. So, in terms of like, when you landed on baking as being her thing, you mentioned, you know, kids all have things that they're really passionate about; I mean, they have their nerdy obsessions. I know like my kids, it's Minecraft; and my daughter, it's Edgar Allan Poe – don't ask. [laughs] But you know, they have their nerdy obsessions. What made you land on baking, as Zoe's nerdy obsession?

JM: So, it's funny because I don't actually bake very much myself. I actually have this little challenge going with my, just a little personal challenge I've given myself just in the months leading up to the, or I had going, in the months leading up to the book's released about baking.

I said, 'I'm going to bake one cupcake a month for,' I think I did it for the last three or four months before the book came out; just to like actually give myself some experience of baking.

The reason why I decided to put it in there is because I actually really enjoy watching baking competition shows in my free time; this is like my relaxation. If I need like a show to kind of zone out and just kind of relax too, I'll put on-- A lot of people are really into the The Great British Bake Off.

I really like that one but I also especially love the kids' one, so I watch-- On the Food Network, there is a show called Kids Baking Championship; and I sort of based the show in my book on that. And yeah, and it's like you watch these kids; and every week, they bake all these amazing things, and it's like a little competition, and it's just-- I'm always just so amazed by them.

And so, I was sort of inspired by these children on this show. And I was like, I would love to write a story not necessarily taking place at the baking Championship show, but something that kind of ties back into that.

And so, that was kind of my inspiration; and basically, all of the baking knowledge that I gathered for this book, was just from watching all of these shows and just kind of absorbing a lot of knowledge along the way.

I mean, these shows they always have the people talking about mistakes they've made and things they should be doing better; and I'm like, oh, like, I just take mental notes. But it's funny because I really don't bake that often but I feel like I actually have a lot of knowledge so I really--



Yeah, this little experiment that I had been doing to, kind of, bake some cupcakes before the book came out, was kind of fun because I was able to kind of use these things that I kind of had gathered along the way from these shows.

GP: I totally agree. Like it's so funny; baking shows for you is like the cooking shows for me, and I love like the kids' MasterChef, and it's like--

JM: Yeah, I love that show too.

GP: It's so fun to see like--

JM: Any cooking competition show with children or baking, it's so amazing. I'm like amazed at these young children.

GP: I mean, and I can't boil an egg so like to me, it's just like I see these children and they're like, you know, poaching lobsters; and I'm like, 'Wow, can you come cook for me?'

JM: Yeah, exactly.

GP: So, at one point, my kids were into the whole like kids' cooking shows as well; and I was trying to see if 'little man' would maybe have an interest in learning how to cook so then I could have like, you know, a kid chef in the house.

JM: Yeah.

GP: But, no such luck.

JM: I know, because there are definitely those situations where the parents don't cook but the kids get really into it; and you're like, 'This is great.'

GP: This would be so good. We could have like really gourmet dinners every week.

JM: Exactly.

GP: Amazing. I love though how like that also opened the door for you to discover a lot of things. You know, like people often say, it's not about writing what you know, it's writing what you want to know.

JM: Exactly.

GP: And it seems like, kind of, that played into it as well.

JM: Yeah, for sure. I think the reason why I don't bake often is just, I've just never really thought about doing it. I like baked goods. I'm actually not-- I don't have as much of a sweet tooth as I think is kind of required for the amount of baking that you see on these shows.

Like, a lot of times, I'll watch the shows and I'll see them bake something, and I'll be like, 'I don't know if I would eat that.' Not because it doesn't look amazing, but because I'm actually more of a savory person than sweet person.

But you know, I feel like it is fun. Like, it is fun to see the different creations they can make; and I think I'm not too adventurous to try like really intense baking stuff like macarons or you know, things like that. But a cupcake, like, I can handle that.



[laughter]

GP: There's also so much great sensory detail that comes in in like kitchen scenes, right? Because you've got the flavors, and you've got the smells, and you've got the textures. And oftentimes, I think as writers, we tend to fall back a lot on sight and sound. And if you've woven food into your story and made it like a core part of your character's life, that by default, makes it necessary for you to tap into all those different senses.

JM:: Exactly. Yeah. I definitely made a conscious effort to explore the different other senses that you would have in a kitchen. I think there's actually-- Speaking of more shows, there have been a couple reality shows that go behind the scenes at bakeries.

I think like on TLC or something, I just found the episodes online; and I watched a couple episodes of those shows because they really show you what a kitchen looks like, like a real bakery kitchen and like what the steps are. So, when I was--

There's a scene in the book where the bakery is kind of coming up with a new cupcake recipe; and I took that like kind of the steps that they took to kind of figure out like whether or not a recipe worked or not and experimenting flavors. I took that from, you know, watching the show where I got to see behind-the-scenes of this bakery, where they did that exact same thing and they'd filmed it.

And so, I was like, 'Oh that's how you do it; like, how you figure out new recipes.' And so, I was able to-- Basically for this book, I just watched a lot of television about baking--

GP: I love it

JM: -which added effect of really like calming me-- You know, it's like relaxing to me. So, it was like, it was research and it was relaxation. So, it was great.

GP: I love how reality TV or podcasts have like infused their way into all elements of the story.

JM:: Yes. Seriously, it's like-- I mean I guess, it's kind of nice because then it makes me feel like the things I'm consuming in my free time are, you know, they're story fodder, at the end of the day; you can find inspiration from anywhere.

GP: I love that. And I know it would make me feel less guilty about watching TV too; it's like, I'm doing homework

JM: Exactly, all those hours I spent watching these shows or, you know, listening to these podcasts. Although, podcasts are great because you can do that while you're doing something else. And anything like watching a show, sometimes I'll put a show on my iPad and watch it while I put laundry away.

So, you know, so a lot of times I'm still multitasking, but it's just kind of like a nice-- You know, it's like a little escape, but it's also nice to know that your little escape could potentially become something, you know, for a story, so.

GP: Absolutely. So, you mentioned earlier that you started working on this book shortly after your daughter was born; and having had a similar experience of writing my book when my daughter was very little, how did you juggle that? Like, how did you-- The time management factor, really; like how did you balance or rather like switch between mom duties and writer duties?



JM: Yeah, so I got into the habit, sort of, because I had no other choice, of waking up really early before she would get up. So, luckily, we had a pretty good sleeper. I went back to work part-time when she was about, you know, four months. And so, I had a part-time job. So, I was home with her two days a week; and then, at work three days a week.

And so, all five days of those weeks – during those times, I would wake up early before she did and write for at least an hour. I think I used to wake up around six o'clock, and she wouldn't-- A lot of times she would stay in her crib until 7:30.

And so, I would write for that hour and a half, and I just got into the habit of doing that. And then, you know, on the days that I was home with her during the week, I would definitely take advantage of her nap times.

Often, I would use one nap time to take a nap myself or catch up on other stuff around the house; and then, use the other nap time for writing. So yeah, I just got really disciplined at it. I also did Camp NaNoWriMo in that April; and if anybody doesn't know what that is – it's like a shorter, more calm version of NaNoWriMo.

NaNoWriMo was National Novel Writing Month. Camp NaNoWriMo, which happens every year in April and July, is like a more casual version of it, where you can set your own goal. So, instead of having to write 50,000 words a month, you can set a smaller goal, if you want to, or a larger goal; and it still allows you to track your progress.

You can still like see other people's progress on the page. You can also create cabins, where you can get together with a group of 10 other writers and be in a cabin; and you can cheer each other on – like, a virtual cabin. And so, I decided to do that because it allowed me to feel like, 'Okay, I have this thing holding me accountable.'

I think I wrote maybe 25,000 words in a month, during that, which was like pretty good; that felt like a much more manageable amount of words to write in that time period for me. Like, I've never been able to do 50,000 words in a month. But yeah, it was good.

So, I think I was able to write the first half the book then; and then I finished it over the next couple months, the first draft. So yeah, I think like a combination of waking up really early, using nap times, just being really efficient with my time and trying not to waste those hours.

GP: I love that. And I like also that you were very concrete about the realities of it. Like, you know, oftentimes, it's like, 'Oh yeah, I just sneak my writing in.' Like, you hauled yourself out of bed at 6:00 in the morning.

JM: Yeah.

GP: Like, I could never do that. [laughs]

JM: Some people are night-- Some people are more night owls; like, they might stay up late. I just, I get way too tired at night. I was like, 'I think I can get used to waking up early, but there's no way-- I've never been able to write late at night.' So yeah, I mean, I think it's just a matter of figuring out when you can sneak in those extra hours.

GP: Yeah. So, you mentioned that you got like a big chunk done in April or July or whenever the Camp NaNoWriMo was.

JM: Yeah, it was April; April for that time.



GP: And I mean, 25,000 words, that's a substantive chunk of a middle grade novel; it's certainly not an entire middle grade novel. Once you had the whole draft, like, are you one of those people who, because it's been a while since we chatted about writing-- Are you, now, one of those folks who finishes the whole draft, and then revises? Or do you kind of revise as you go?

JM: So, I finished the entire draft, but as I mentioned before, I did have one critique partner who we were swapping pages with. So, I would send her-- You know, I think I sent her, maybe it was even 50 pages at a time or some larger chunk or maybe it was less, but I would just send it to her; and she would maybe give me some light feedback, but I wouldn't make any of those changes in the moment.

I would just sort of say, okay, going forward-- I think with the exception of her telling me like, "Oh this sounds more middle grade," and I think I shifted gears then, it might've made some changes earlier on. Other than that, I think I just would take the notes, keep them in the back of my mind, you know, use them for the next thing I wrote; but for the most part, wait until the end to revise.

I really just wanted to focus on getting the first draft down. And then after the first draft was done, then I think I shared it with my critique partners, 50 pages at a time or so. And then, I would like polish up the first 50 pages, send it to them; then I would polish up the next 50 pages, send us to them.

You know, and just kind of did that process until I got through round with them. And then, yeah, and then I said we send it to beta readers and that whole other set of things. Yeah.

GP: So, community has been a big part of your writing process. I mean, obviously, I know this first-hand because we were in a writing group together in the MFA program, but you've sustained that a lot in, you know, you've got different groups going on and you mentioned critique partners. Can you talk a little bit about how community has helped your writing and sort of the different types of community that you lean on for different things?

JM: Sure. So, as you said, we used to be in a writing group together. So, that's one area that back, you know, this is before I wrote this particular book-- But when I was writing my previous novels and I was still living in New York, we would meet up with just like a few other writers just to write, one day a week.

And that was a nice little community thing because it wasn't about critiquing each other's work, it was more about accountability and just motivation – because you're sitting at a table at a cafe with other people; and that's something that I don't get to do weekly anymore.

But I still try to do with some of my local Connecticut writer friends that I've made over the years, every once in a while, like maybe once every other month or once a month, if we can.

So, that's still something I try to do. I also have a critique group, although we're a very loose critique group, we send each other pages but we don't need too often in person. We tend to just send each other's stuff as we need it. And then, then we, you know, maybe get together like once every three months or so for an in-person get-together.

And sometimes, we don't even use that for critiquing; sometimes we use it just for like an inspirational, you know, 'Let's just go out do something fun that might be story potter.' Like for example, we went to go to a Harry Potter exhibit in the city.

So, it was just fun because it was like-- It was kind of like a little inspirational outing. So, something to kind of get our imaginations-- You know, like just kind of get away from our laptops for an afternoon, and do something fun.



We still had a chance to talk about what we were doing and our work. But so yeah, that's another group that I rely on.

And the last one is, just going back to my Connecticut friends, I've made a few Connecticut writer friends here; and we actually created like a private Facebook group for ourselves, and we chat whenever we have something going on.

It's actually gotten to the point where we create, like every day, we just kind of check in and say, "What are you working on today? Like, what's going with you today?" And so, it started out is being very much focused on writing; and as we've gotten to know each other better, you know, some of our real-life stuff gets in there too – like, 'This is what we're doing today that isn't with regards to writing.'

But they're great because I feel like when I was writing this draft and when I was querying, they were people that I could just, you know, every day if I needed to, I could just say, "Oh I got a rejection today," or "Oh, I got a--" you know, "I got a request," and have them be both there to celebrate and to help commiserate. So, they've been like a huge support.

And I also, once a year we go on sort of a writing retreat during the summer. And sometimes, we'll go on a second one in the fall. And so, we'll meet in person for a couple days, just at a local Airbnb; we'll just pick one that's driving distance for all of us, so it's very inexpensive.

And again, it's just really nice to have like the in-person people, because a lot of times, you're really are solitary, just writing and focusing in your own books. So yeah. And then, I guess, like the last group, I would say is our group of people from our MFA program.

Again, I don't get to see them as often, but there's still people that, you know, when we all have something going on, we tend to support one another – like going to your book launch or you know, or like periodic get-togethers. So yeah.

GP: We just had-- One of our friends just published her YA novel, and we got together for that launch so that was super fun.

JM: Yeah. So, it's just nice to have-- It's just nice to know that there are other people out there, even if you don't get to see them all the time, they're still part of your community.

GP: SCBWI has also been like a big part in terms of kind of sustaining that learning from the MFA.

JM: Right. I go to their New England conference every year; I have for the past few years. Mainly at this point, for the community, I feel like-- You know, the workshops are always really great and they have some really great keynotes but I feel like the most fun part is just getting a chance to get some FaceTime with some of the writers and authors that you've met in previous years.

And just get a chance to, you know, just have a weekend of getting away from your home life, and just getting to focus on being a writer for a weekend and just, kind of, again, gain that motivation and inspiration and community; that kind of fuels you for the next few months of, kind of, being more solitary. So, I do enjoy that conference as well. I've always really enjoyed SCBWI, in general.

GP: And I also want to highlight for, like, our listeners, a lot of these, if you're not a children's writer, there are a lot of other similar organizations for different genres; and they have often both national big conferences, but then also like you Janae mentioned, you know, regional conferences or more local conferences. So, there's usually-- You can usually find something wherever you are.



JM: Yeah. And what I like about the regional conferences, if you are looking into one of these organizations and they have the option, is that they're a lot smaller and less intimidating.

GP: Mm-Hmm.

JM: And I think that if people attend every year, you start to get to know and you see familiar faces. I feel like now that I've gone to the regional ones, often whenever the big ones happen, I feel like, 'Wow, that's a lot of people.'

Like, I think I actually-- I went to the New York SCBWI not to attend the conference but to meet with my agent and a couple of his other clients that were going to be at this conference. We just met up for drinks one of the nights, and I just saw--

I think I got there right when one of the cocktail parties they were having at the conference we were about to start; and the amount of people that were just in the lobby just like going into the area where they were going to have this party, which is so overwhelming. I was like oh my gosh, this is why--

I mean it's a really great conference but I can see how it can be a little bit intimidating to newbies, especially. So, if you do have one of these organizations – either SCBWI or the others – and they have smaller regional ones, that's a really good place to start, because I think it's just easier. Smaller group makes it a little less intimidating, I think.

GP: Absolutely. And then, you can make like writing buddies at the local or the regional conferences, and then you can attend the bigger conference--

JM: Together.

GP: -with your writing buddies.

JM: Exactly. Yeah. I mean even like, although you know, there is something to be said about-- There's still ways to make writing buddies. I mean, we met some of our writer friends at Writer's Digest, and that's a very large conference. I think it helped that we were Kidlit and I think somehow, we kind of found the other Kidlit people within this larger conference that covers a lot of genres in age categories and everything.

GP: Yeah, that's the thing, when you go to a conference that only does one particular genre or one particular type of writing like, you know, children's books or YA, then everybody is of that group. Whereas if you're at like a more generalist conference, you can often find your birds of a feather because there's fewer of them within the bigger population. So, love that.

So, can you tell us a little bit about your publishing journey? Because, I mean, it was so much fun to see all the good news happening and all the exciting things. But obviously when you were in it, you didn't know what the outcome was going to be.

You didn't know you were going to get this great agent and then get this book deal, and that Zoe's was going to be so well-received. So, what was that like when you were going through it?

JM: Yeah, I mean, it was definitely exciting. This was the second book that I queried, but the fourth book that I had written. The first book I queried, several years earlier, had some really good experiences with agents getting requests and things, but it didn't actually lead to any offers of rep.

And so, and then the next two YA books, one of them was, I just sort of decided not to query it because I kind felt like it wasn't there, and I just sort of lost interest. And then the third one I wrote was actually through a book packager, so I wasn't allowed to query it, but that book ultimately didn't come to fruition either.



So yeah, so it was a lot of years of waiting in between, trying to figure out what to do after my first query experience. And then I wrote this one, and I could already tell that it was a better story than the ones that I had done before; I felt like it had more of a hook, and that's always one of the things that agents look for.

I felt like my problem before was a lot of the books I was writing were "quiet"; that was always like the note I would get in my rejection letters. So, I think like from, off the bat, I kind of knew like, 'Oh I think I might have something here. This is a much more of a hook. Like, I feel like I have something.'

So, I felt more confident going into querying this time around; and then I got really lucky. So, I queried some agents to start, and actually got a revised and resubmit early on, which if listeners don't know, that's when the agent says that they like it but they have some suggestions and if you're willing to make those changes, they're willing to reconsider the book.

So, I just-- I took her notes, and I thought they were really good; and so, I decided to go ahead and make some changes. And the rest of the agents that had requested it, I told them to sit tight, I'm going to get back to you with this revised version.

And then a couple months after that, while I was still editing, I ended up finding out that I won this local Connecticut children's writer's award. Basically, it's called the Tassy Walden for New Voices in Children's Literature Award, and they have-- It's a Connecticut State award, and you can just apply. I had applied sort of on a whim because one of my writing friends was like, 'You should apply.'

And it was the first year, since knowing about the award that I had something ready to go. And yeah, so that May of that year, this was 2017, so about a year or so after I had first started writing Zoe, I found out I won this award; and it was really exciting, and a lot of validation.

So, I won in the middle grade category, they have the award in four different categories from picture book to YA. So, that was really great. And so, basically, then when I was ready to resubmit the book after making the rest of these edits in the fall, I had this like extra little boost of confidence because of this award.

And one of the agents that I ended up sending it to, Alex Slater, who I ended up signing with, knew about the Tassy Walden Award because he's from Connecticut – so, he'd heard of it before. So, that got him even more excited.

So, I think when I submitted it to him in the fall, he was just like excited to read it; so, he read it really fast. I remember submitting it to him, it was like the weekends before Thanksgiving; and like the day before Thanksgiving, I got a response saying that he wanted to have a call the following, like basically right after Thanksgiving weekend.

And so, this is the Wednesday before Thanksgiving; and I wasn't going to be able to have the call until Monday. And so, I was like, oh my gosh, like this-- You know what a call is going to be, but I also don't know. And so, I was like, this is a long time to wait.

[laughter]

JM: But luckily, it worked out. And so, I had the call, and he made an offer; and then I was able to go back to the other agents who had it and let them know. And it was all really fast. And so, ultimately, I got multiple offers but decided to go with Alex, after having conversations with him and even actually getting a chance to visit his office in the city in Manhattan.

And the both of us have a mutual friend who signed with him. And so, I also got a chance to chat with her about working with him and just felt very confident in my decision. And then, so, that was in November.



So, basically, I think we signed in early December; and then he decided to just go ahead and put it on sub in January without us doing any more additional revisions. I think because I had just done so many revisions using these notes from that resubmit, from this other agent that, you know, I had just done so much.

I think he just felt like, at this point, I think it's better just to let an editor see it, and see what else they would want you to do. So, he put it on submission in January of 2018 and like a week later we got the first offer, which again, was very fast and unexpected.

And then, ultimately, he was able to get enough offers to be able to create like an auction, which in the book world just means there was one day in February where all of the interested publishers had to submit their bids, and we just kind of considered all of them.

I chatted with a couple of the editors; and then we landed on HarperCollins, Katherine Tegen Books. So yes, it was just crazy how we graduated from our MFA program back in 2010, and you know, and this book deal happens in 2018. It's just like, it's interesting how long it can take, but then how fast things can also, certain things can take.

You know, it's like publishing can be like that. Like there's these moments of waiting and it being slow; and then there's moments where so much is happening in a short amount of time and it's just like whiplash. So yeah, I feel very lucky that it worked out this way.

GP: I can so relate to that. And I think like, I don't know what your experience has been in the editing process, but the editing process felt like that as well; that like, hurry up and wait.

Janae Marks: Yeah, exactly.

GP: It's like, there's a lot of like waiting for the feedback or waiting to hear back, but then like as soon as you hear back, it's like, 'Oh, and we need those revisions like yesterday.'

JM: Exactly. Yeah. Like, after the deal happened in February, it was several more months before I even started the process of editing with my editor. So yeah, it's a lot of, then it was just like, 'Well, I have this deal but I'm just sitting here now.'

[laughter]

JM: Yeah. And then, you only get six weeks to do it, you know, to edit once you get the note. So yeah.

GP: You got six whole weeks, that is so not fair. [laughs]

Janae Marks: Yeah. Okay, maybe I'm lucky. I don't know. Yeah, six weeks for each draft, for like the first round of edits and the second round of edits.

GP: I got two weeks for each round of edits, and one of them was over Christmas and New Year's.

JM: Oh wow.

GP: I know. I was like, what are you guys doing to me? Anyway, but it wasn't so bad. I mean, I think nonfiction is different too because nonfiction, there's like a lot of the pieces were already in place in terms of the concepts. So, a lot of it was more just like, we need to rejig this paragraph.

JM: Right, I see what you mean. Yeah.



GP: But still, I'm like, 'I could totally give you six weeks, that would've been so nice,' but yay! So, it's been so much fun catching up with you, and hearing about your story and just the journey from where we were in class together until now; it's just so exciting.

So, what's coming up next for you? I mean, Zoe is now out in the world, and that's exciting. Obviously, there's still, I'm guessing some promotion and marketing stuff that you've got coming up.

JM: Yeah, so I actually have some, I'm going to be doing a little bit of traveling with this book, which is exciting and getting a chance to visit some bookstores and schools. So, that'll be cool. But also, next year, in 2021, my second book with Katherine Tegen Books HarperCollins is coming out, I won't say too much yet, but it's another contemporary middle grade.

It's a completely different story but with a, just as wonderful and passionate character. Yeah. So, I'm excited to share more details about that soon. Yeah. And that's basically it, just trying to enjoy this debut life experience in the meantime.

[laughter]

GP: I actually wanted to ask you also with the cupcakes, because like I've noticed that while the cupcakes are part of the story, they've also appeared in your platform. You mentioned you had like your Cupcake of the Month Challenge and whatnot. What else have you done, sort of, on the platform marketing promo side of things from an author's perspective? Because often, I think writers don't even know what they can do, like, what they're supposed to do.

JM: Yeah, I think it is smart, I think, if you can come up with something that maybe ties in to the story, because I know people love baking and that's kind of, you know, like seeing a picture of a baked good on the internet, people are going to get excited about that.

I noticed on my Instagram when I posted the photos of the book next to a Cupcake, I got so many more likes and engagement than if I just, you know, posted anything else really. So, it's pretty interesting.

So, I think I kind of just was like, let me take advantage of this, people love baked goods and cookies and or cupcakes and anything. So yeah. So, I think if there's some element of your book, I suppose, that you can kind of create some sort of marketing material around, I feel like that's really great.

Beyond that, I've really just been trying to-- I don't know. I feel like it's one of those, I'm just learning as I go along and just trying to experiment with different things. I know, for sure, one thing I've been trying to do is build up my newsletter, because I hear that that's a really important thing for all authors.

GP: Yes.

JM: You know, just trying to get like-- I'm trying to just be really, you know, consistent with sending out monthly newsletters and trying to figure out what kind of content people want to read, and keeping people updated; I think that's really important.

And just having like a really good, I think, solid website with updated information, even if it's not a flashy website, just having like, just the basics there so everybody can be kind of, you know, knows exactly what's going on, where you're going to be.

And the other cool thing that I did, was I partnered with one of my local independent bookstores to do a pre-order campaign with them. I decided not to do-- A lot of people do pre-order campaigns that are much more involved, but because this is middle grade and it's not as common to do pre-order campaigns--



I just had to do a simple one where if you order from one particular bookstore, this bookstore that I live close to, they will send you a signed copy because I'll be able to go in and sign them before they ship them out – and you'll also get a bookmark and a sticker.

So, that's just another way to kind of market, you know, the idea of getting this extra little swag to get people-- And also, it's supporting local independent bookstores, which is really important.

GP: Absolutely. And I mean, pre-orders are so important for writers too. I mean, because that can-- I'm not sure if this is exactly how it works, but my understanding is if you pre-order books, then when the book actually releases, they all get counted on that day.

JM: Yeah, I do. I think it gets counted that first week of, in that first week of sale. Yeah, like the first day of sales.

GP: So, like you can basically be stacking up your sales numbers leading up to that first day; and that can really help, you know, in terms of like bestselling lists or even just getting on any kind of list.

JM: Yeah. Or just showing your publisher-- I think it also just like, as a way to show your publisher like this is, you know, 'People really are excited about my book,' you know, like, 'This is how many copies sold before it was even out.'

You know, I think it's, in a way it feels a little bit like pressure for the author, but on the other hand, I guess I can understand wanting to kind of, you know, boost as much of that as you can, do as much as you can. So yeah, I think I've just been trying to get people to pre-order, get people to notice the book through enticing them with cupcake photos; my strategy.

GP: I have to say the cupcake thing is super smart. I don't know if you remember that knitting story that I was working on back in the MFA.

JM: Yeah.

GP: And at one point, I thought like, 'Oh, I can have like different like knitting patterns, and I can knit the different things.' It takes a really freaking long time to knit-- [laughter] Like baking, at least it's like a few hours, but then it's done and you've got the finished product there that you can post on Instagram; but knitting, not so much.

JM:: Yeah. That's why I was like, this is something feasible. You know, I think that's another thing too, like, you know, you come up with cool ideas, but you got to think about, what's actually feasible, because those months before the book comes out are really busy.

You know, they're hectic. In addition to writing your next book, you know, you're potentially doing interviews, or you're just-- There's a lot of other admin stuff, I feel like, answer email; like, just all this stuff that just takes up so much of your time. So, coming up with something that's fun but isn't too time-consuming, I think is also important.

GP: Love it. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

JM:: So, tying this back into our earlier conversation, I think my number one tip is to find your community. I really could not have done this, I think, without all of the friends, the writer-friends I'd made along the way, starting with our MFA cohort, through the friends I made at conferences, and the friends I made, you know, here locally here in Connecticut.



I just-- These people have been there when I wanted to quit, even though I didn't really want to quit, but it was just hard, you know?

Like, just having these moments of doubt of, you know, where you are in the process; and then when good things happen too, like they're there to help celebrate and to really make you feel good about what you accomplish – and they really get it. I think writer-friends, unlike, you know, you can have other people in your community that aren't writers, but I think having other writers

GP: Muggles.

JM: They know. Yeah, the muggles.

[laughter]

JM: They're going to know what it's like. They're going to know what it feels like to get a rejection. They're going to know what it feels like to have a hard time writing a book; and all of a sudden, hit a snag, and you just can't figure it out.

You know, they're going to know what it feels like when you finally figure out that snag, and you're so excited. You know? So, I think just the support and the camaraderie has been so, it's been what kept me going over all of these years. So, I think if you can find your community, I know that's a huge part of the DIY MFA program too; it's so important. So, I think that's my number one tip.

GP: I wholeheartedly agree. And you know, like, when you were talking about like our non-writing friends, and you know, I had made that comment about the Muggles, it reminded me of – so, 'little man' at one point, was telling me and lawyer-hubby like, 'Oh, I'm half-blooded.'

And I was thinking that this was like a, you know, Brazilian heritage, American heritage thing. No, no, no, no. Apparently, mommy's a wizard, but daddy's a Muggle. And I was like, that is correct.

JM: That's awesome.

GP: So, I feel like my work is done. But that's the thing, I think like writers, you know, we are word wizards; and so, we need people around us – even though we live in a Muggle world and we have to operate and function with non-writers, it's important I think for us to also have that support network. So, I wholeheartedly agree.

JM: Yeah, especially with writing being so solitary. I mean, you spend so much time just by yourself in front of a computer, you need people. It's just-- It's hard to do it without that support.

GP: Absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Janae, for being here. I am so excited for you; and I'm so glad that we got a chance to celebrate this amazing accomplishment with you here at DIY MFA Radio. So, thank you.

JM: Thank you so much for having me; this was so much fun. I love this podcast, and I'm so happy I was able to be part of it.

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

