



Brandy Colbert

298: Character-Driven YA and Middle Grade

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/298, because it's Episode 298. Also, if you enjoy the podcast, please, subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, Stitcher Radio, and you know, all those 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.

Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing Brandy Colbert, the critically acclaimed author of several YA and, now, Middle Grade novels. Her books include *Pointe*, Stonewall Award winner *Little & Lion*, *Finding Yvonne*, *The Revolution of Birdie Randolph*, and her upcoming 2020 releases, *The Only Black Girls in Town*, and *The Voting Booth*. Her short fiction and essays have also been published in several critically acclaimed anthologies for young people.

Born and raised in Springfield, Missouri, Brandy spent several years living in Chicago before relocating permanently to Los Angeles. She is very active on social media and also works as a copy editor for magazines and books. And she is on the faculty at Hamline University's MFA program in writing for children.

So, welcome, Brandy. It is so great to have you here.

Brandy Colbert: Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited.

GP: So, I usually like to start with the story behind the story, but since we're talking about more than one of your books, I kind of thought it would be good to hear your story or the story behind your journey as a writer. So, you talk a little bit about, how did get started, and what drew you to writing in the first place?

BC: Yeah, absolutely. I feel like I either have the story of like every writer or like, I feel like there's either the writers who started really young or the writers who were like, 'I didn't know I was a writer until I was, you know, 30.'

So, I am in that first spot. I have been writing since I was about seven years old. I think, you know, I've always been a big reader. My mom, especially, was a really big reader. So, there were always tons of books around her house.

And you know, library trips every Saturday, or to the library, or the bookstore, or – on a really good day – both. And I would just get piles and piles of books, and just devour them. And you know, there was one Christmas asked for nothing but books. And so, I just got this huge box of books, and that's still like one of my favorite Christmases ever.

And so, I started writing, I think mainly through English classes at school in elementary. At a couple of the schools I went to, they would have-- At the first school I went to, they would have us write just little, our own books. And it was made out of like cardboard and contact paper; and then, you know, we would draw and illustrate online.



And then when I moved to a new school in second grade, they did the same thing, but they had Young Authors Contest that they would host; and I think it was through the local college, which I actually ended up going there.

But they would award students, they would read our work and award us. And I think it was second grade that I won the Young Author's Contest there. And it was for a book called The Talking Teddy Bear; and I still have it, and I share it at some of my school visits or library visits, younger kids.

And then from there, it just went on to like, I realized I really liked writing. I liked illustrating too, but I would illustrate at home; and then the illustrations would start to include dialogue bubbles from the characters, and then sort of descriptions of what was happening along the bottom. And then I was like, 'You know what? I like the words better, so I'm just going to start writing.' 'My drawings weren't great, so I'm going to stop illustrating.'

So, that was as a kid, and I kept working on my writing throughout my childhood and my teens, but was really private about it. And then when I was about 25, 26, I decided that I wanted to really just focus on getting published, and then my whole journey kind started from there.

GP: Love it. And you know, there's so many things in the story you just shared that I can totally like parallel my experience; like the whole idea of like making the books, that's how I started in first grade. Like, that's what got me into writing. Although it also involved a massive meltdown in the library; we don't need to talk about that part. [laughs]

BC: Ooh.

GP: But yeah, I think like you're totally right; some writers kind of know that they're going to do this in some capacity since they're really young, and then other people seem to discover it later. So, it's kind of cool to hear that this has always been a sort of common thread in your life, in your career. So, that's awesome.

BC: Yeah, I think since I've been writing since I was so young, I will look back at my old writing and it's pretty embarrassing to look back at some of it; but I'm really glad I have it. I've noticed that I was always sort of writing about the world around me, trying to process it.

Even my books in second and third grade; like the first book I wrote in I think first grade or second grade was about gentrification, basically – even though I didn't know what that was, at the time.

GP: You know, that's really fascinating too because I'm seeing little bits of what you're saying, sort of that working out what's happening in the world around you in Birdie Randolph and also in The Only Black Girls in Town. Can you talk a little bit about sort of like-- I'm guessing these books were your way of trying to figure out some of these things; so, can you talk about that, and how that inspired you to write those books?

BC: Yeah, definitely with Birdie, it's funny, I never really start with a plot. You know, my books aren't super plot-heavy. They're more character-studies, I think, or slice of life.

But I definitely am thinking at the back of my mind, like I have a character in mind and then I think about, you know, where do they live, how old are they, what is their family situation like, what is their friend's situation like - romantic life, what are they going through? And then, I sort of start working through things.

So, with Birdie, you know, it's a little hard to talk about that because there is sort of that family secret in there--



GP: Right. [laughs]

BC: -which I might have already said too much. But I know I really wanted to write a family and just, I'm always trying to explore families different from mine. And I also wanted to write about addiction, and how that would affect a family; you know, sort of an immediate family, but then also an extended family.

So, that I think was where really started with Birdie – trying to tackle some of those things I was seeing, not in my life, but just it felt like as I got older, more and more people I knew were dealing with addiction or you know, everyone knew someone who was dealing with addiction. It just seemed like something that was coming up more and more. So, I wanted to sort of talk about that.

GP: And, with *The Only Black Girls in Town*, like, what was the impetus behind that story or that character?

Brandy Colbert: So, that one I think is sort of, I never really write about my life, but that one was definitely inspired by my childhood. I don't know how the idea came to me, but it just, I think it was one of those sort of lightning strikes moments.

And I remember texting one of my friends, who's a Middle Grade and YA writer named Corey Ann Haydu. And I texted her and I was like, 'Hey, has anyone ever written a Middle Grade about a black girl – basically, the only black girl in town, and then another black girl moves across the street?'

And she was like, 'No, no.' I was like, 'All right.' And then, I just got going on it. And I don't normally do that. I don't normally pitch ideas to people before I begin writing. I don't normally even really know, you know, what the basis of the story is before I start; but that one just came to me.

I grew up not the only black girl in town, but I grew up in Springfield, Missouri, which is the Ozarks, for anyone familiar. Our most claim to fame is Brad Pitt. [laughs] He is from there. He grew up there. You know, it's a pretty, white area. It's pretty conservative, pretty white – straight, you know, not a lot of variety there.

And so, I grew up just really yearning for friendships with other black girls; and I had them off-and-on sort of through church or you know, sometimes at school, but never really like, seems like most people would, kind of, pass through town and leave; and I totally understand that. So, I never really had that stability in black friendships that I wanted. So, I really wanted to write about that experience.

And, I guess, when I was younger, I thought I was the only one going through that, feeling alone – like there were no other people who understood what it felt like to be me – who felt like, you know, one of the few members of their race in a town that didn't understand them. But the older I got, the more I realized that is the experience of a lot of people.

And that's what I've been hearing as, you know, the book title pretty much tells you what it is. So, the title and you know, the content, the summary has been feeding out. I've heard from a lot of people that said, "Oh that's my childhood experience, can't wait to read it." And that just makes me feel so good, even now at the age of 40 to feel like, 'Okay, I'm not alone,' you know?

GP: Yeah. I mean, I certainly can't say that I've had that experience because I'm white, but I remember distinctly in my high school – so it was a very, very, very white Prep school in New York. And this girl from a family from, I think, India or sort of that part of Asia, moved to our school.

And I remember her confiding in me at one point and saying like, "Wow, I can't believe I'm like the only dark-skinned person in our entire grade." And it was weird because at the time, like I hadn't stopped to really think about that, but the minute she said it, I was like, Whoa.



And it was like this ton of breaks landed on me and I was like, it like opened my eyes to something that I hadn't noticed; but all of a sudden, was like so obvious I should have noticed it sooner – and like, been empathetic to it.

So, it's really interesting how, I think this book is going to speak to people in different ways depending on their experiences, but I think it's super important that that conversation be happening.

BC: Yeah, I really hope so. I'm glad you said that because it reminds me of the essay or lecture by Rudine Sims Bishop, an educator; and she's, you know, the Mirrors and Windows lecture that people quote a lot without actually crediting her.

But it's really important I think for people to be able to look into other lives that they don't get to live, and also to see their experiences. And that's how I grew up was, you know, always sort of seeing other experiences in the books that I read, but never seeing my own. So, it feels really good to be able to put my own into books now and know that people can relate to them.

GP: Absolutely. And I think it's really important for me as, like I wish I'd had these books growing up as a white girl in a very, like you said, like not a whole lot of variety there, kind of school.

And I think like-- You know, I was reading Birdie Randolph, and one of the things that totally jumped out at me is the scene when her aunt is braiding her hair, and she kind of flinches, and her aunt makes some comment about like, 'Oh your scalp is so sensitive.'

I had never thought about that. And yet, all of a sudden, I had this like visceral connection to this character; and I felt like whoa, I have this little nugget of how that experience might be like, even though I've never had it myself. And that, I don't know-- I was just so grateful for being able to have that, and being able to see the world through that lens.

And yeah, I just think it's super important not just for people to see themselves, but to also, like people who are used to seeing themselves, to be stretched beyond that – and see people who are different, and experience that as well, I think.

BC: Right. No, I love that. And that is such a common thing in the black community just from a young age; you know, just getting your hair braided and hearing like, 'You're tender-headed,' like, you know, 'Sit still.' So, it's really nice to be able to share some of those, sort of, intimate, picture-based moments with the wider group.

GP: Yeah. So, one of the things that I thought was just such a great theme in both of the books, actually, I think it comes up in different ways, but it's this theme of family. Like the families in both Birdie Randolph and The Only Black Girls in Town; it's a very loving family, but they've also like, especially in Birdie's family, like there's some stuff going on over there.

And so, can you talk a little bit about that theme? Is it something that comes up in a lot of your books or was it more just for these two books? How does family play into your writing?

BC: Yeah, it's kind of that weird thing once you have, roll books out and you start to see themes, or people point out your own themes too more often; it's what happens to me. I'm like, 'Oh yeah, I was totally trying to do that,' which I think it's usually subconscious.

But yeah, I think since my second book, Little & Lion, I have really sort of focused on family, different types of family. So, Little & Lion has a blended family with – Suzette is the main character and she's



black and her mother is black, and then her mother has been with a white Jewish man named Saul for almost her entire life, since she was six years old.

And she has this, who she calls her brother, Lionel. The parents aren't married, so they don't have those contractual bonds, but it's a real family; you know, they've been living together for many years; there's that. And then you know, I have a single father raising the main character in Finding Yvonne.

And then, you know, Birdie, like you said, a lot of complicated family dynamics with sisters and extended family and all of that. And then, The Only Black Girls in Town character has two dads, who conceived her via a surrogate who was their long-time friend.

So, I think for me, I grew up in family that was very like two parents, two kids – me and my older brother. And then, they got divorced when I was 12; and I just sort of felt like everything shattered. I was not expecting it; and it really made me sort of redefine, 'Well, if we're not that family that I always thought we were – then, sort of, what are we?' And trying to put that together in my mind, but it taking a long time.

So, I think I'm still, sort of, working through that as an adult, and just kind of trying on these different families – and wanting to explore what those differences look like for them. But also, showing, you know, family isn't just two heterosexual parents and two kids – you know, opposite genders. It's so much more, and it's really what you make it.

GP: Yeah. You know, it's so funny, as you were describing your own family, it made me think like, it's kind of parallel to Edie's family, right? Because she's got an older brother and her parents get divorced when she's like 12 or 13. Was that a conscious choice, to sort of have that mirror your own experience or did it just sort of happen organically?

BC: It was not a conscious choice at first. I've tried to write about divorce from the main character's perspective, like, many times over the years. I think my poor agent has seen like so many failed manuscripts [laughs] 'I feel like it's about divorce, but it's like, this isn't working.'

So, I think for me, at least at this point, it was easier for me to approach it from, sort of, a main supporting character, not the main character though.

GP: Right.

BC: And yeah, it wasn't my story but now that you mentioned, it did have a lot of parallels, and I think-- You know, I do get sort of emotional when I think about Edie's situation – and we didn't move across the country from my dad, but like, she's dealing with a lot of stuff.

And that age, I was 12, you know, my parents got divorced. It was a lot to go through growing up and you're in, well, junior high for me, at the time – or you're in middle school, and just everything is changing; and so, your home life is, sort of, the one thing you need to be stable; and when that really started changing, it's just tough, I think.

GP: Absolutely. I think especially like the fact that she has all of this upheaval and on top of it all, she's going from Brooklyn, which is very different from the town where she ends up, I forget the name of the town, I'm blanking on it, but you know, like basically goes from being in a place where there are a lot of other kids like her; and suddenly, she's one of the only two black girls in town, and that's got to be jarring.

BC: Yeah. And I was thinking about sort of those differences. Like, didn't have really, you know, 'big



city' people who moved to Springfield, where I'm from; but as I've gotten older and traveled around, I'm just really surprised by the differences in how I grew up and how other people grew up.

And I had a really wonderful, safe, you know, sort of, childhood, but I could imagine someone coming to a smaller town. You know, the town in my book is called Ewing Beach – and just coming to this tiny town, especially with a little tourist beach town, and just being like, 'What's going on here? Like, this is my life now?'

GP: Absolutely. You know, another thing I noticed also that was a parallel between Birdie and Alberta's story is we have two very, very driven and high-achieving protagonists. Like both of them have very high standards for themselves. I mean, Birdie wants to be the perfect daughter. She's trying so hard to fit within this, you know, mold that her mother has sort of created for her.

And Alberta is like constantly wants to be challenging herself; I mean, the whole surfing thing. And, you can tell she's really driven young lady. Can you talk a little bit about that? Like, is that something that you've seen come up in a lot of your books? And sort of that high-achieving driven protagonist, like, it's not-- It's not like every book has characters like that. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

BC: Sure. I think you're revealing all my secrets now.

GP: Sorry. [laughs]

BC: No, this is me creeping into my books. So, I, you know, grew up with parents who had really high work ethics. They both grew up-- My parents are really quite young; they're still both in their 60s and you know, I'm 40 and I have a brother in his 40s, but they grew up in Jim Crow, Arkansas.

So, you know, they went to segregated schools, and they remember when their schools had to be desegregated. And they grew up on farms and without a lot of money, and a lot of siblings.

And so, they had very different lives from me; and they sort of worked really hard to make the lives for themselves that they wanted. And you know, so, from a young age, it wasn't an amount of pressure but there was definitely that sense of, 'You're not going to go out into the world and embarrass us.'

You know, 'You are going to get good grades, you are going to college.' You know, 'You're going to make something of yourself.' So, it wasn't really quite, like I said, like Birdie's mom isn't my mom, but there are definitely some seeds to that, you know, planted in there from my childhood where, it never seemed like a choice but sort of without that pressure.

So, I still felt like I was able to be a kid, and definitely have fun and be involved in a lot of different things. But you weren't going to come home with bad grades in my household at all.

GP: Yeah. I can so resonate with that because, you know, as the daughter, like first-generation American, my parents were like, 'We are not going back there.' You were making it work in this country.

And there was a definitely a lot of pressure, you know, good pressure. Like my siblings and I achieved lots of good things, but I can definitely relate also to that feeling of like 'Uh-oh, I better not let anybody down.' And it does build up a lot, you know, and it's, I don't know, for a teenager that can be a lot to carry.

BC: Yeah, I think so. And I've heard that too about the immigrant experience, sort of, sometimes paralleling like southern black people from the United States. I think there is sort of that sense, especially those who-- My parents didn't migrate very far from the south; and some people consider Missouri the South, but that's a whole other conversation.



[laughter]

BC: But yeah, I think it is a lot of pressure. I think back on like, ‘Wow, I was a good kid. Like I think back on it, and it didn’t seem like a choice at the time, and I’m glad because it’s given me a really high work ethic that I still have today. You know, like I hear a lot of people say like, “Oh you have all these books out, you keep writing.” I’m like, What? “How are you doing it?” And I’m just like, “I don’t have a choice.”

It still feels sort of like that imaginary person. It’s not my parents anymore, but it’s sort of, that imaginary person being like, you know, “You need to do this and you need to work hard at it, you need to get it right.” I don’t know if that ever goes away.

And sometimes, I hear criticisms of the books that like, you know, ‘Not every really high achieving and you know, we need more Young Adult novels where kids are just, sort of, getting through or you know, their highest aspiration is junior college – or like, they may not even go to college.’

And I totally agree with that because I don’t think that it’s always normal to have this super high-achieving kid, but for me, that was my reality and I do think it is the reality for a lot of black people, especially sort of their parents did push themselves into a different class in their life that they expect their kids to acknowledge that and keep it going.

GP: Absolutely. And I think as a kid, I liked reading books, where I could see protagonists who were trying to live up to these expectations because then I didn’t feel so alone. It can feel very isolating when you’re that kid who has to basically carry – or one of the kids – who has to like carry the family legacy forward or some crazy stuff like that.

You know, not that my parents were that, you know, relentless. But there was definitely that feeling of like, ‘You better not mess up.’

BC: Right. Exactly.

GP: You know, ‘This is our family chance.’ Like, you know, ‘We got to get this right.’ And yeah, it’s a lot. And so, it’s nice, as a kid to see that in a character and realize like, ‘Oh I’m not just the only weirdo who has this experience.’ [laughs]

BC: Right, exactly. And that maybe there is like in Birdie, I wanted to show-- You know, I mean, the word Revolution in the title is pretty bold, but her revolution is a quieter one, you know?

But I think that it’s a good way to show that like, you can do, ‘You can have little quiet revolutions, you can fight, you can advocate for yourself to still be your own person while still achieving those goals that have been set for you and that you want to set for yourself.’

GP: I wish I had had Birdie in my life when I was in college because like, this was the book I needed to read. Like, I needed to read this book when I was like 18 or 19; and realize that like, ‘Yes, it was okay to test the waters, and not always be the good girl’ – and like, I needed to hear that.

And yeah, so like for all like people who know good girls out there, like, you need to read this book because it totally spoke to me. Not that it gives permission for – I’m making air quotes here – but “bad behavior”. It’s not about that, but it’s like, you know, letting kids loosen up and actually be a teenager for once.

BC: Right. Yeah, and thank you for that. I remember the summer before my senior year, I was sort of like, ‘I want to start having more fun,’ you know? And so, I sort of made that choice for myself; and I was still making good grades and still very involved and being the good kid, but I was allowing myself to go to parties.



And like, I'm not advocating for teenagers to, you know, experiment with alcohol, but you know, it happens and it happens in my hometown. And just allowing myself to sort of experiment I guess, with not, again, like you said, being a bad girl, but just doing the things that my peers were doing – and seeing, kind of, trying it on.

And I'm really glad I did that, you know, because I got to see parts of myself, I think, that had been repressed; and also, knew what I didn't want to do, and you know, my limits, and how far I was willing to go.

GP: I think also, especially for young people, if you have been in this experience where there's really high expectations of you, all of a sudden, it makes every little misstep feel so terrible. And so, like when I said, "I wish I'd had this book in college," that was when I started testing the waters and trying to like, you know, test boundaries.

Like I had always been a rebel, but like in, sort of, my own weird way. But that was when I started actually doing things that my parents would object to, and that I knew they'd object to. But because of that, I felt like every time I had a misstep, suddenly, I went from being perfect to like terrible person.

And I think it's important for teenagers to realize like, it's not all-or-nothing. Like you make one mistake in your life, it is not going to completely make you into a bad human being. And I think that's sort of one of the core themes in the book. Like we have a character who's made a mistake and has been coming back from it for years, and you know, like sort of dealing with that repercussion.

And yet, in some cases, like you do make a mistake – the impact of mistakes isn't always handed out in a fair and equitable way, let's put it that way. But there is that element of like, you know, people should have a second chance. And so, I liked that Birdie grapples with all of these questions in that book.

BC: Yeah, thank you. I wish I had had it in college too, because like you, I sort of went from like tentatively testing the waters in high school to like college, like full-blown, like so many mistakes, back on those years.

[laughter]

BC: And I'm like, wow. Like I survived that coming from all corners, and still trying to get good grades and think about what I'm going to do after, you know, "for the rest of my life" (air quotes), and it's a lot. So yeah, I would like to see more books like that out there too, kind of pushing back on those ways that we've set for ourselves and the other people set for us.

GP: And sort of talking a little bit more about that issue of like, you know, when someone does make a more serious mistake; I'm thinking here about Booker, and his character and his journey in the story. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Because like that's a pretty tough thing to, topic to tackle in a story, and I thought it was just handled so beautifully. I had so much empathy for this character, but also recognize-- I also had empathy for his dad and recognized like why his dad was behaving the way he did. Can you talk a little bit about sort of crafting that character, and really humanizing him?

BC: Yeah, thank you. I have to say like I'm, sort of, known for writing unpopular [laughs] love interest in my books or not all of them, but you know, people have a lot of strong feelings about them, it seems. So, I was really surprised by the positive response to Booker.

Yeah, I don't think this is really a spoiler, I think it's mostly in the jacket copy, but you know, he has been to juvenile detention in Chicago; they call it the Audy Home, from like, you know, old days – he used to call it that. But he's been to juvie and he spent time there after assaulting one of his football coaches.



And you know, I didn't write it so that football was going to be his way out. But it was definitely something he enjoyed, and he was good at it, you know, but the coaches didn't-- I don't know if they really saw him as a person or at least one of them didn't; and there was just a lot of tension there.

And then he had been dealing with the death of his mother, which, you know, I don't really think you ever get over, but especially at that age, must feel so raw and fresh.

So yeah, I think at the beginning, I've read from a lot of people, like they thought he was going to be like a bad boy and that he was going to be like, you know, her revolution; like, she's dating this kid from the wrong side of the tracks.

But no, like I just wanted to write this guy who's gone through a lot and who didn't always make the correct decisions but is really trying to do right and just be a good person. And mentioned his dad because, I love writing his dad.

His dad is so strict, and he's just like, 'No, like you messed up and you're not, you know, never again like we're not doing this,' which again is sort of that parent that we were talking about, like sort of that pressure.

But he has that example of his kid messing up and he's basically like, you know, 'You're not going back to juvie, you're not going to end up in jail, I'm not going to give anyone a reason to lock you up,' which for a young black man, especially in Chicago, like where any reason to lock you up is typically taken.

So yeah, he was a fun; and kind of, sometimes, it's sad, at times, characters to write. But I really wanted to show this kid and even like this big black kid, you know, with nuance, because I think it's really easy to look at stereotypes in, you know, news stories of kids, you know, that size and that race who are characterized a certain way.

GP: You know, it's interesting like, he's in many ways, perhaps the gentle of all the characters in the book, you know? And so, I love how you kind of took that stereotype and completely flipped it on his head; and especially, given that like the thing that he had gotten in trouble for was so violent and so-- I love the how that, like, we don't actually see that.

Like, it would've been very stereotypical to have it sort of seep out; and suddenly, he lashes out every now and then, but he's so gentle the whole time; and I just love, love, love that about him. I hope I'm not giving away spoilers, but he-- I just love that character.

BC: No. Thank you. Thank you.

GP: So, one of the things that I think, and we've sort of touched on this already, but like, obviously, the topic of race and racism comes up in the books. It's impossible for it not to, but it doesn't feel like a central; like, it's not the issue in either of these books in sort of the way that it drives the story.

I mean, I feel like Birdie really is about her finding her own voice amidst the voices of her parents in her head. And for me, Alberta's story feels like a story about friendship and trying to grapple with like, what does it mean to be friends with both her new friend and now her old friends?

Can you talk a little bit about making, sort of, handling race in this way where it is completely infused into the story, but it's not a "problem novel", let's put it that way, to use like a term from like 1970s YA, not making it into a problem novel.



BC: Right. And yeah, I'm very familiar with problem books or issue books. I always say that I write issue books that are not issue books. You know, in the 80s-- I was a kid in the 80s, and a teen in the 90s, so I was reading a lot of that older YA that was written in like, you know, the 70s or early 80s.

GP: Same generation as me.

BC: Has to overlap. Yep. And so yeah, those books, it would be like someone would go to a party and have a drink and like, be taken to AA the next day; and it's like, we don't need to really go that far. You know, there's more nuance to it than that.

So, I really try to write books that examine all these different issues in a person's life, but the book isn't necessarily about that. And sometimes I see reviews even though I should not be reading my own reviews, but you know, I'm human. I will see reviews that sort of complain about that like, 'There's so much going on in this book,' and you know, that's a valid critique, if that's how they feel.

I feel like, for me, it's my job to show a really honest human character; and humans aren't just going through one thing in their life, you know, at a time. So, you know, I just think about like, 'Okay, I could be going out having a really good day, go out running errands and be met with a racist comment or some kind of racist situation.' I'm not expecting that, I don't know what's going to happen, but it happens.

And so that's the kind of thing that I want to put in my work; just really realistic interaction. You know, I don't go around life thinking, 'I'm black, I'm black,' but like underneath, there is always that sort of recognition that like I am black and people, some people that's all they're going to see – or if they first see me, that's the first thing they're going to notice about me.

So, I guess, it's trying to sort of get that strict feeling into my books and say, "Hey, these characters are going through real-life stuff, just like you are. But they also have this added layer of, you know, oppression and discrimination that they often have to deal with."

GP: I totally, totally hear you. And you know, recently, it's become very like posh to be, you know, people talk about being color blind. And in a way, it's almost like people talk about-- Like, the other day, I was reading somewhere someone was talking about like how some books were talking way too much about race.

And I'm like, but that's exactly the sort of thing someone would say if they haven't been in the experience where that is a regular part of their lives, and that people are going to judge them based on that.

And so, I love how you grapple with it and it's part of the stories, but it's also not. Like you're hitting the reader over the head with it, but it's part of reality. It's part of what your characters are going through, so why would one not talk about that?

BC: Right. I think that too. Yeah. I see a lot where it's like, 'Well, we just want a book with, you know, a black main character or you know, a Latinx main character, any other marginalization, where it's just, just about them, and it's not about their race or their marginalization.'

And it's like, 'Yeah, that's great to hope for.' And I'm sure there are some books out there that do that really well, and I think we need all types of books. But I do think for me, it would be really unrealistic to write a book with a black man character, and not have them experience anything to do with their race or to have conversations about it because that stuff does come up in everyday life.

So, for me, I think it's just more important to put that out there. But also, I now have the language to speak about some of these things; and I didn't have that language when I was growing up, because again, I was one of the few black kids in a town with people who didn't look like me.



And so, I would have those conversations at home with my parents. You know, I was a kid; and so, I didn't know a lot of times how to respond to things or I didn't know the history or context behind something like, you know, the stereotype of black people and watermelon, things like that.

Like being able to respond or to say, "Hey, did you actually know that this is where this comes from, and why this is so hurtful?" So, I like to sort of-- You know, it may not seem realistic to some people, but I was also like a pretty outspoken kid. So, if I had known that stuff I would've, you know, talked about that at the time.

But I really like to put those things in my book for kids who grew up like I did, who didn't have the language or maybe weren't brave enough to speak up – or just for them to know, 'You know, you're not alone, and this stuff comes up, and I understand and I see you, and you know, I've been through it too, and it'll be okay.'

GP: Yeah, absolutely. So, this ties to the next thing I wanted to sort of talk about, your foray into writing middle grade because, you know, you were talking about how important it is to have the language – and you're now moving from sharing that language with teen readers to now even younger readers. So, can you talk a little bit about like, what drove this shift, first of all, to write for Middle Grade?

By the way, I love Middle Grade; that's like my favorite age group to write or read for. And so, like I totally understand why like on sort of a happiness level to write Middle Grade, but like in terms of this particular book and, in general, with your career, why did you move in this direction? And then, also, like sort of the bigger why about, you know, giving kids and younger teens that language to talk about this stuff.

BC: Right. So, I guess, yeah, I love Middle Grade, and you know, talking earlier about going to the library and bookstore like that age, I remember just, yeah, I think books were my friends and they just, those stories are the ones that resonate with me. You know, I still get starry-eyed when I think about or talk about Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume, and you know?

I mean, it's just-- It's that feeling in your chest that you're like, 'Wow, like those books meant something to me.' And so, I started out with YA, I never really thought I would be a children's book author. I thought I was going to write Adult Novels and then I somehow came around to YA and realized like, 'Oh, this is pretty cool - you know, I can write about teenagers.' I don't know if I ever saw myself writing Middle Grade. But then I started reading a lot of it within the last few years.

For a while, I was just reading mostly Adult and YA. And then I was like, 'You know what? I loved those books when I was a kid, I'm sure I would still love them now.' And it turns out, yeah, ton of great Middle Grade being published today, and a lot of the old stuff really still holds up.

So, I think I just was sort of drawn to that, and maybe also wanted a break from writing about these sad, angsty teenagers that have become my brand. You know, I think the greatest compliment someone has told me who has read both my YA and my Middle Grade is that, 'Oh, it's still you; it's just Middle Grade.' And I was like, Oh good. You know, I still want my voice to come through the same.

But yeah, also just kind of speaking to that lost, kind of, tween that I felt like; you know, my parents getting divorced, not seeing people who looked like me, not knowing how to talk about that or really knowing what it meant black person, especially in that kind of environment.

It was just a lot of things I was grappling with and it felt like, hmm, like this age, you know, you grapple with a lot of that stuff as a teen, but there's something really poignant about it, I think, at that sort of middle grade age where everything is new but you don't have the freedom to sort of go out and explore things in the way that you do as a teenager.



GP: Absolutely. And you know what's interesting too? I feel like there's something a little more optimistic about middle grade. You know, you refer to like the angsty teens, and while I wouldn't necessarily say that-- I definitely think Birdie's story is very, like, there is an optimistic thread. It's not like a total downer.

But there's something about the younger kids that even when the stories get really dark, there's some like, I don't know, there's a lot more optimism. Like even a sad ending like Charlotte's Web, like there's that optimism at the end of it.

And so, I think there's something about writing for kids who are at that age where the world can still have that glimmer of light, like more than what teens might embrace. I don't know, there's something really powerful about that.

BC: Yeah, I think so too. And, there is-- It's just also fun, you know?

GP: Yeah.

BC: Not to toot my own horn, but I feel like there is like, there are some funny lines in my YA books, but like they sort of get glossed over by the seriousness of the topics and you know, what the character's going through.

And then I was like, 'Oh, in middle grade, like they're still going through things, and it's still, you know, some serious moments, but like I get to be funny.' And that was really so much fun to just make these sort of, you know, corny, bad jokes – put them in a book, and lighten things up. That was really a nice change for me.

GP: Absolutely. So, as educator, as a professor at Hamline, you work with writers who are wanting to write for children; they're doing their MFAs in writing for children.

What are some of the things that, like you notice as you're, sort of, from a meta perspective as you're working with these writers? Like, do you see things from your own experience and what they're grappling with, or does it sort of change your own perspective on your own writing? Like, I'd love to hear from, like, the educator's point of view.

BC: Sure. And when you said educator, I was like, who are you talking about? [laughs] It's been a really interesting change for me. I never really thought I would teach, you know, I myself do not have an MFA so that was a little surprising when I went into teaching.

But it was one of the best decisions I've ever made in my life, to teach; I learned so much. You know, we meet twice a year, Low-Residency MFA program for writing in children. So, we meet in January for 10 days; and then we meet in July for 10 days. And those, it's like summer--

I never went to summer camp, but it's like summer camp, you know? It's just like writing camp – I went to dance camp, you know, when I was a kid. But it's like that, just working on your craft and working on this thing you love for hours, you know, for over a week.

But I learned so much from the other professors there, from the other faculty members, and I learned a lot from my students. One thing that has been really helpful for me, is I'm sort of pantsers versus plotters for writing.

So, like, you know, writing by the seat of your pants without an outline or like being a really regimented writer who, you know, has the board full of Post-It notes and a full outline before you even start. I'm definitely of the like, 'I don't really know where this story is going, but I'm just going to jump in.'



And it's been really interesting and really good for me to work with writers, explain things to them about craft that I was like, 'Oh that's just sort of in me, I can't explain it.' Well, now I have to, you know, because I'm working with students. And so, that has been really helpful to me.

And just also learning things with them about what's working, what's not working, why a plot is important from certain stories. It's just been really helpful and to work with a variety of students too, you know, they're never work--

I have different students every semester that I work with remotely; and so, they're never working on the same thing as the students from the semester before. So, it always feels kind of like a fresh start, but I learn so much. So, I feel like I'm sort of getting my MFA the whole process.

GP: So, what's next for you?

BC: Oh, what's next for me? Well, I have two books coming out this year, which sounds wild; I still can't believe it. Yeah, it's really exciting. I have a middle grade out this year; and then I have a YA out this year too. And I love being able to go between the two age groups.

And so, my YA that's coming out in July is called *The Voting Booth*; and it was basically everything I've never done before. It's dual points of view. And I wrote from the point of view of an 18-year-old girl and an 18-year-old guy; and they are two black first-time voters who will be voting and, you know, pretty vague as to who's running.

You know, it's not really talk about candidates, more about the active voting. And so, you catch them at the beginning of election day, and they kind of have this wild day trying to vote.

So, one of them – Marva, the girl – she gets to vote, and then she sees back in line behind her this kind of, you know, kind of looking like a slacker guy. Like, he's got his headphones on, like drum sticks hanging out of his pockets, and she sees that he can't vote.

And so, she makes it her mission to be like, 'Hey dude, like we're going to make sure you can vote today.' And, at first, he's like, 'Who is this girl? Like why is she so invested in my life?'

But she really is invested in voting and she's been canvassing and, you know, thinking and doing all these things to get the word out about voting because she realizes like, this is her life. Like if teens, you know, young people don't take it into their own hands like. And set in one day, and it's like 12 hours; and you know, there's a little romance in there too.

So, you know, like it's my happiest romance art. There's a lot of stuff going on in it, but it was really, really fun to write, and really a good challenge. I hope it can open up some conversations about, you know, voting and sort of your civic responsibility because I think I wasn't--

The way the elections worked out, I was not able to vote until I was like 20 or 21, something like that. So, I remember just it being like, 'gosh, I just really want to vote.' Like I just knew that my parents went and voted; and it wasn't really a question, and that's just what you do.

And so, I just hope that it reminds teens and/or anyone who reads it that they have a voice and they should use it; and that it also feels a bit with voter suppression.

So, especially as, you know, black characters, I think in my own life, I was reminded even if my parents didn't say it that like, hey, you know, especially in the southern United States where my family



is from, it was really hard to get to vote for like many years even after it was legal and that, you know, before the Voting Rights Act was passed, like for really terrible reasons.

So, kind of, trying to pack all of that into a book that also has some kissing and a famous internet cat that goes missing.

[laughter]

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

BC: Oh my gosh, this will sound a little bit generic, but it's just to keep going. As I said, I've been writing since I was seven and you know, I went in and out for some years, like during college I sort of didn't write as much, I never really took writing classes.

I studied journalism so I was writing, but it wasn't, you know, my fiction or my narrative nonfiction. And I just-- For a while there, trying to get published was really hard; and I queried for literary agents for about four years and four books, and I did not sign one until last book.

And you know, I was just about to quit because I just thought like, 'Hey, this is the best thing I've ever written and if no one wants this, like, you know, what am I even doing? Like just move on, like focus on your journalism career.'

And thankfully, I did not do that; and I'm just so glad I didn't. It took a really long time from the moment that I thought, 'Okay, I really want to start working to get published,' to the moment, you know, that I got published.

But even after you get published, it's not like everything is just coming up roses all the time or perfect, you know, you get rejection, you still have idea, don't go anywhere. I have been lucky enough to stick with my agent who is just a dream. You know, but I switched publishers after my first book because my publisher didn't want my books anymore.

And so, you know, it's a lot of things to consider, but I just say, keep going, because really, 10 years ago, even, I never could have imagined that. I mean, 10 years ago is when I was like, maybe I should just quit because I've been at this for a really long time; and then the next year, everything changed. So, it would just be to keep going and believing yourself, and just be an honest writer; you know, write your story, because no one else can write your story.

GP: Such, such great advice. Thank you so much, Brandy, for being here today, and for sharing all of your insights with us.

BC: Well, thank you so much. This was fabulous. I had a great time.

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

