



Sonja K. Solter

303: A Survivor Story as a Middle Grade Novel in Poems

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 at diymfa.com/303, because it's Episode 303. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please, subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and you know, all the usual places where you might listen to podcasts; 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 Sonja K. Solter. Sonja graduated from Stanford University and earned an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University, with a critical thesis on writing trauma in middle grade and young adult realistic fiction.

She is currently a creative writing mentor to youth with the Society of Young Inklings, and she enjoys writing poetry and prose for children of all ages. When You Know What I Know is her gorgeous debut novel that I literally read in one sitting because I could not put it down, and I'm so excited to be talking to her about it today. So, welcome, Sonja. It is so great to have you here.

Sonja K. Solter: Thank you for having me.

GP: So, I like to start by asking about the story behind the story. What motivated you to write When You Know What I Know, and why?

SS: So, I'm a very intuitive writer; particularly, for my first draft. So, for me, it felt like my main character, Tori's voice, sort of, just came to me one day, I was sitting in the woods writing, somewhat full-fledged with the poem, Believe Me, which is one of the first poems in the book. And just felt like her voice wanted to be heard, and you know, that's how it felt to me.

However, I do know that a lot of what's bubbling up in me and kind of my big questions about the world – about human relationships, humanity, all of it – comes out in my writing. So, in this case, you know, not right in that moment when I was writing that; but looking backwards, I could see that I was very influenced by, actually, social media comments.

I had had some experiences in the prior years, prior to writing the book, where I think it was mainly actually comments about news articles, where I'd really noticed that people had a lot of difficulty understanding survivors' experiences, survivors of traumatic things.

And it seemed to contribute to not believing them sometimes and, or just a real not understanding, like, 'Why would they do that? Why would they, you know, do this afterwards? Why would they feel that way?' It just really struck me, I think. I think it's because we often conceptualize everything.



So, you know, we have an idea of what it looks like, when something traumatic happens – or how someone would act, or how we would act, or what it would feel like. So, I think that there was an element of wanting people to understand that experience; that was why I wrote the book. And certainly, I was aware of that later on, you know, especially during revision and things like that.

GP: So, this idea of belief, I mean, it comes up again and again throughout the book. It's one of those, I guess, common threads that unites the story.

As you mentioned, that's something that is true of lots of different types of trauma that people could have difficult and traumatic experiences; and often, the response might be to not believe that that is really what they're feeling or really what, you know, their experience is.

And, of course, that non-belief can be even worse because then the person is then questioning their own sanity and their own, you know, like, 'Am I real? Like, did this really happen?' Can you talk a little bit about the path of belief, and how it shifts throughout the story? Because there's some very pivotal belief-related shifts throughout Tori's experience.

SS: Yes, it definitely also interacts with self-doubt that can be happening, anyway; you know, kind of like, 'Did this really happen,' sort of thing. So, it's so complex, really. So, in this story, it starts off pretty early with when she tells her mother "She first doesn't believe her".

You know, I'm sort of putting that in air quotes because I think to the mother, she probably wouldn't have said it that way initially. For her, she's thinking-- It's a lot of people with kids, especially, think that they might have misunderstood what happened, like they're not old enough to understand or, you know, there was some sort of misunderstanding.

And even in other situations too, that can happen. And so, that does evolve throughout the book. The mother does eventually believe her. There's sort of a teacher's help that's involved as well, but it takes much longer for the grandmother to come around to understanding that she, you know, this really happened to her.

I think that it's definitely like a huge part of the journey for this kind of trauma. And it's an essential part, however it plays out for different people. You know, in this story, there's a particular trajectory, but everyone's trajectory is going to be different.

But outside, people do have a big influence on that; and particularly, family members. But of course, the most important thing then is one's own inner work on that, and you know, believing oneself, and being strong oneself. So, some people maybe they never have support, and in therapy or something might be where they are able to heal in that way.

In this book, it was important to me to show a trajectory in which she was healing throughout this book. You know, while I was trying to keep it realistic, this particular trajectory does have her mother believing her fairly early on, where she realizes. And I think that's realistic too though because the mother, for the mom, it's initial denial also because she doesn't want it to be true for her daughter.

GP: Right.

SS: You know, sometimes, because adults are going to have their psychological reactions too, right? So, she is going into some denial but however, as she sees what's happening with her daughter because then she starts having behavioral issues and being really different, then it could kind of break through the denial. Yeah. Yeah.



GP: Right. It's interesting because like now, as we're talking, I'm sort of running my brain back through the book; and it's interesting that like the pivotal scenes where something around either other people believing Tori or Tori believing in herself, are often landmark scenes sort of in the three-act structure.

Like I would almost put the mom's, the moment when the mom is like, 'Okay, wait a minute, sit down and talk to me about it.' It's kind of the inciting incident. Like, it's at the end-- It's like where the story shifts from Act One to Act Two; and now, we're on that healing journey.

Up until then, she's just sort of floundering and trying to figure out like, 'What do I do? This bad thing has happened, and nobody's believing me.' So, like, it's interesting to me that like it's almost like, they're the moments that point to the key, like, 'plot points' of the story. Even though this is a very character-driven story, the plot is like anchored by these moments of belief.

SS: Yeah, I would say that's true. It's definitely one of the pivotal threads.

GP: Yeah

SS: And definitely plot-wise, I would say too, because a lot of the other ones are relationship-driven, like you said, which I consider under character too. So yeah.

GP: And even some of the belief moments are relationship-driven as well, right? Because like when the mother finally does believe Tori, that is like, it's a bonding moment for them; and like the sister, like there's that beautiful scene where she knocks on her sister's door, and her sister just gets it right.

That's also like a moment of belief, but it's character-driven but it's also a key plot moment as well, which is kind of cool. Like usually, people think character-driven stories don't have a whole lot going on in terms of plot, but there's a lot happening structure-wise in terms of plot in this book.

SS: Yes, definitely. And it's also inter-thread, thread is related to each other, which was interesting when I was doing it because I sort of had to take it thread by thread; that's how I tend to do my revisions. But of course, you can't completely pull things out from the relationships with the other threads.

Other things sometimes changed when I pulled on a thread, and changed it a little bit. And I was going to say too that I think this part with the sister understanding it – I'm just realizing this now as I'm saying it, about my own writing – is that I think that was maybe a little bit more commentary on how, you know, adults aren't always the ones who get it right away.

But along with that, I think it's important that, to not give up because that doesn't mean they won't eventually get it. So, I think a lot of what I wanted in the realism there was, 'Hey, things really are difficult, for real, you know, not just in this conceptual way we have, when they happen, but they can still shift.'

Because, I think, sometimes when we have difficult moments, it feels worse than we could have imagined; and that, maybe almost makes us lose hope more. And I think that having some realistically difficult and then it still shifts, was important to me.

GP: So, another thing that I think is really unique about this book is, not just in terms of this structure character versus plot-driven, all that good stuff, but also, the framework that kind of contains the book, which is the verse, the poems.

Can you talk about why you selected poetry versus, say, writing it all as prose? And why individual poems as opposed to, say, one long – like I'm thinking of Virginia Euwer Make Lemonade series or True Believer – those books? Like, what drew you to the individual poem novel inverse structure?



SS: So, part of it goes back to the intuitive thing; and I think that was influenced by the fact that I had just been working on picture books, right before. So, I was really heavily in just words, and rhythm, and all of it; you know, all of those techniques that go into picture books. It was kind of the end of my picture book semester when I wrote the first couple of poems for this.

So, that was sort of simmering in me creatively, I think. But I think the reason I stuck with it is because this form-- And it can be done, of course, you can be very poetic in prose as well.

But this form, in particular, for emotions, and the way they surge through bodies and you know, shift around in our bodies and getting really inside of Tori's head in terms of moment to moment, I felt like that form really allowed me to express that in a very direct way – that at least more traditional prose, I think would be much more difficult to do that.

I think you could be more experimental with prose; and it would feel more poetic probably, and you could do it. So, I feel like that is why I knew that it was the right form because it was coming out the way I wanted; I felt like I was in her experience.

GP: You know, it's interesting for me as a reader because I have to admit, when I first got, you know, the pitch from your publisher about this book to have you on the show, I was worried because like this is the type of book that I have a hard time reading. Like, I don't like reading about kids going through hard stuff because that's just, it's hard to read, right? Like it's not an easy book.

But one of the things that like the minute I opened it up and I started or rather like I queued it up on my Kindle and I started reading the first poem, I was like, 'Oh okay, I'm going to be okay.'

Something about it being in verse meant that we could be in her head but it, kind of, I don't know, it anchored me in a way that if it had been prose, I think it would've been too hard to read; like it would've been difficult for a reader to get through that experience.

But the fact that it's poetry, somehow, I don't know, softens it, makes it easier to grapple with. I don't really know why, but there was something about the poetry that just made it digestible.

SS: And I think that, to answer the other part of your earlier question, that doing it poem by poem like that, also most likely, helps with that--

GP: Yeah.

SS: -because you can go a bit topical, you know, and jump around a bit from scene to scene. And I think staying in her head the whole time would've been difficult; that would've been a pretty intense first-person experience.

I think I wanted to have those other poems. You know, different snippets come to me at different times, but in retrospect, I think that that was also essential to do it that way rather than a one long, kind of, thing. I think that would've been too stuck in her head, I think, probably for the reader.

GP: I definitely agree. I also think that like the poems help to illustrate that almost fragmented feeling that we get, especially from her in the beginning where it's almost like she's dissociating, right? Like, she's not-- She doesn't want to deal with this thing that's happened.

And so, like, her brain isn't really where-- You know, she's like off, like shut down, and you know, people around her are talking to her. There's that sense of like, she's just sort of floating through life.



And the poetry helps to give us that feeling, like help us understand what that might look like, because it kind of does, like you said, skip us around; and we're suddenly like we're in a moment, and then it just like ends – and that kind of reflects what she's going through because she's in a moment, and then she just sort of disappears mentally.

So, I think it works on a lot of levels like also on that meta level of letting us understand and grapple with what she's going through, and what her experience might really feel like.

We've been talking about the characters that drive the story; and I think the role of the supporting characters are really important. It's a relatively small cast of characters in this book. Like you really only have Tori and like the handful of people who are around her.

So, can you talk a little bit about the role that these supporting characters play in the story? I mean, you've got her mom, her sister, then her dad kind of sweeps in. The grandmother plays a pivotal role, the best friend at school plays a pivotal role, the teachers play important roles.

Can you talk a little bit about how each of these characters sort of helps to bring Tori through this experience, or sort of how they help her hinder, in some cases hinder her healing?

SS: Yeah, I mean, I think to start with, it shows-- At the beginning of the book, it shows the complexity involved because, you know, here is her experience that's traumatic, and she is trying to process and deal with, but then it's affecting other people too. That's often not a good thing for her because they're having their own reactions about it, it's disrupting the family.

I guess we didn't say that her uncle is the perpetrator in this case. The abuse happens before the book starts, but there's that aspect mixed in there as well. So, I think part of the complexity is really there are all these threads.

While they're not the most important aspects, I wouldn't say necessarily of her healing journey, they interact with it in various ways. So, each of her relationships also is playing in. So, it's like I can feel all those threads.

We talk about threads in the sense of writing, but I'm feeling all those threads like in her healing journey. Like it's not this isolated healing journey. You know, she does go to a therapist but it's not like just her and the therapist, and they're dealing with it. I mean, it's just-- It's within a context of the setting. It's all of her different relationships.

So, each of them has their own healing arc in a way too for her – even just from the healing context. And some of those happen earlier than others because it's a fairly short book, and you know, I'm doing arcs for them. They somewhat resolve to some extent by the end of the book.

That can take, of course, years for people in real-life. And to some extent, I think for this one as well, if you think about it ahead of time, like I think with the grandmother, they're just sort of coming back together at the end with the grandmother believing her.

And so, it's left as a start. It's called that it's-- You know, it's a start to getting back close to her. In that case, you actually see the mother's relationship to her own mother too.

GP: Yeah.

SS: So, it's this sort of rippling effect out into her family and friends.



GP: And it's interesting also because since she's holding it in, especially at the beginning when, you know, she hasn't told her mother yet, she's at school, she's not – you know, her behavior has changed, people don't seem to-- It's like people won't-- They don't know what's going on, so they attribute her behavior.

Like her best friend is attributing her shutting down and ignoring her as being like, you know, that they're not friends anymore, which is understandable from her friend's perspective because she doesn't know what's going on.

But, so it's interesting also how, kind of, the knowing and not knowing plays into those relationships as well. And once the mother, for instance, knows and then she tells the teachers, that creates a ripple effect because now people are starting to understand what Tori's going through

SS: Well, and it's so difficult for her because there is this shame around it.

GP: Yeah.

SS: She doesn't want people to know. You know, it helps for people to know, but she doesn't want people to know. So that's another aspect of the difficulty for her that she encounters.

GP: Yeah. So, there's that like internal tug of war happening as well.

SS: Yeah, definitely.

GP: This is obviously, like tough subject matter. Like it's hard for even us as adults talking about it. Like for me, it's hard. At the same time, it's important that these conversations happen; and it's important that they happen in middle grade because there are kids who go through this.

Can you talk a little bit about-- Like, there definitely is a line, I think, between middle grade and sort of "appropriateness" - and I'm doing air quotes here – for what would be appropriate for middle grade versus what's appropriate say for YA; but this type of stuff is important.

So, can you talk about like writing this book, what was your thought process in terms of making this clearly a middle grade story; but also, conveying it in a way that is digestible for a middle grade reader?

SS: So, to take a slightly different take on it for a second, I have a pretty strong opinion about, this is why I did my critical thesis on trauma. It's not necessary to show graphic details even YA like necessarily. I mean, that one has to think really carefully about, not that you never would necessarily; I would never say never, but thinking very carefully about whether that's necessary or not.

And part of the reason it's true for this book could be true for YA as well – in that, you know, this is a survivor's story; so, what's important to this story isn't so much the details of the abuse, it's her experience of the emotions and the processing, you know, and all that.

However, with that said, I did know that it was a helpful thing for middle grade to begin the book. I deliberately began it after the abuse; so, it starts with her trying to tell, and that was deliberate. There are a few flashbacks but they're just sort of a few little impressionistic, you know, setting details – also not specific to the abuse; and that was important to me.

But I do think I'd be more likely to do a YA story, somewhat, more that way. But I definitely-- I do agree though that you can be somewhat more graphic with YA, if you feel like that's necessary, where I would not do that in middle grade.



GP: I love what you said though about how, because I agree with you, I think that there is a lot of YA that can feel gratuitous. It can feel like it's overly graphic.

And for me, it's not so much the abuse and trauma-related stuff, but more like a lot of the violence that we see, especially back when the whole surge of dystopian and "yadda yadda", don't get me wrong, I love me some dystopian fiction but like there's also a lot of graphic violence in those books; and it can keep you up at night. So, I do agree with you that just because it doesn't graphically show the thing, doesn't mean that you can't capture the pain.

SS: Right. And that realism, and that it's not exactly the same thing. The realism isn't exactly the same as what exact details you show. I don't think that's the same thing at all.

GP: Say more about that.

SS: So, I mean, maybe this is because I'm, you know, pretty character-driven too. So, to me, the experience that the character's having is the most important thing. I guess, you could even compare it to in art. You know, like impressionism, can feel so real to us sometimes more real than a more realistic painting – not always but sometimes.

And that's because it's trying to capture the experience of seeing whatever scene they're portraying in that painting. So, I feel like you can have a realism that's very much about getting into the experience of the character; and so, you wouldn't necessarily need any particular detail for that.

Like, well, and I mean, honestly, we're picking and choosing details anyway, right? I mean, we say realism but we're picking which details we show; we're not literally showing every single, tiny detail. So, I think that's important too. I think sometimes people feel like they have to do that, show every little graphic detail; and so, I think it's just important to be conscious about it.

There are definite-- I'm sure there are cases-- I can't think of them off the top of my head but I guarantee you I agree with certain cases where there is a graphic detail included, but I think being really conscious about it; and realizing that you are choosing, you're choosing, anyway. So, think about Why, why you're using it.

GP: Absolutely. And, you know, it's interesting you mentioned how like we're choosing the details we put in; like, that is totally true. There's a book called *What We See When We Read*, which is all about like what we imagine as we're reading; and the fact that if we tried to make it a composite drawing – but with words, that it would actually feel less real than if we just gave like a key detail.

And somehow, that key detail gives the reader enough to build a realistic picture around it versus if we describe each and everything the way we might to like, say, a composite sketch artist like, you know, in a police precinct or something, you know, sketching a suspect.

And like, we're giving every single detail, every little hair in the eyebrows; and yet, it doesn't actually capture fully exactly what the person looks like because it's a composite; it's not what we have in our heads.

So, it's interesting to me that you mentioned that also, in terms of like the details we include in the story because as writers, we get to pick and choose; like, our stories are not composite sketches of reality – our stories are carefully curated impressions of reality.

SS: I think it's important to remember too that one can tell it different ways.



GP: Exactly.

SS: I try have to remind myself of that all the time in writing. You know, when I'm writing, it's like, 'Hey, you can tell it different ways.' And sometimes-- Even sometimes, all of them work or all of them don't work or you know-- It's not really just, there's one way to do it, and it's this exact certain kind of realism.

GP: And also, depending-- I mean, if you play, say, with point of view in a story, you could have different-- I mean, in this case, we're very 100% solidly in Tori's point of view, but the story could have also been told with multiple point of view, and the same exact instance might be interpreted.

I mean, we know this for a fact, at the end, when she and her best friend are talking; and that like her best friend is interpreting the scenes earlier in the story when they're hanging out but not really connecting. Her friend is interpreting them very differently than, you know, she thought.

SS: I actually had a version of where Rea has an alternating narrative with her, which was so useful for her backstory. I mean, I had some sense of it that I got to know it much better why she was interpreting it that way. Which really also emphasizes why people have their own perspective coming into a situation, and you know, their own backgrounds playing in, projections playing in, and all kinds of things are playing in.

GP: Absolutely. So, before we started this interview, you were talking about the journey to publishing this book, and how it's kind of a unique journey. Can you tell us a little bit about like once you had found the voice and you'd started writing it, sort of, how you took it from finished manuscript to actually a book out into the world?

SS: So, there was some hesitation. So, it was a long journey, first of all. I'd say about, well, now maybe it's a six-year journey. I keep saying it's a five-year journey, but I keep forgetting to add time. So, pretty early on, I had some editors who weren't so sure about the subject matter.

It's becoming with the #MeToo movement and things like that, it's becoming a topic that is published more now, I would say, just slowly now, but it was more unusual then.

So, I think that that trajectory did mean that there was a time where publishers felt like that was a book that they could publish, to some degree. So, in terms of my personal journey with it, I actually ended up finding my publisher through a SCBWI conference. So, I did not have an agent at the time.

GP: And just for our listeners' sake, SCBWI is Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators.

SS: Yes, thank you. So, I was at my local conference, and at the conference-- Well, it's really after the conference, but there are usually some agents and editors there; and they will give you their address to submit one's manuscript to in a certain length of time, after the conference for conference attendees, which is a hard thing to do normally because usually people are closed unless you're agented.

And in this case, that is actually how I found my publisher. Although I did have to be somewhat assertive because I actually sent them a later-- You know, I had changed over time based on various feedback and things, and I had sent them a later draft; and I had actually gotten a 'No', but it was one of those longer notes where there's a little bit more detail there.

And I immediately thought, 'Oh they would like my more original version better.' And so, I just asked her, I said, 'Would you be willing to look at this? I think that it sounds like you'd like the original version better.' And, she did. And then, that's how I found my publisher.



GP: I love that. And so, you said you didn't have an agent when you connected with your publisher. So, what-- You know, because a lot of people think when you are, if you want to go like big publisher route, you have to have an agent. Like, that's generally the advice that is given. Obviously, in this case, you didn't, So, what did that look like, in terms of going through the publishing process?

SS: So, I did negotiate my contract myself.

GP: Was that scary?

SS: I didn't feel like it was scary. Well, I had some resources just from, you know, other people, taking a look who has some knowledge about it. And then, the SCBWI also has a, I think it's just in their general guide about children's publishing; towards the end of it they have a sample contract, and they go through it.

So, I could tell that it was a very standard contract. It wasn't like, you know, that much of that was unusual about it, but it was a little bit, I guess, but I didn't feel like that was anything that felt like a step-back to me at all, though, or something that particularly concerned me.

GP: So, I want to interject because I think a lot of writers often have this idea that like, 'Oh, we just handed off to our agent, and our agent just deals with the contract stuff.'

I had an agent, and I read that contract with a fine-tooth comb; and every single thing that comes across my desk that is at all requiring of a signature, I go through with a fine-tooth comb because ultimately, it's our careers on the line.

So, I love that, you know, in a way, it's like you had to deal with it, and you had to review your contract yourself because you didn't have a choice. But I think that that really is the smart thing to do for any writer.

SS: Honestly, it was useful too because even some aspects of what was coming, you know, with publishing, with the publishing process, my first hint of it were in the contract because, I don't know, I was more clueless than I thought about just lots of little details and things like that.

So, yeah, I think diving in on any of that is a good idea for everybody. And I was going to say really quickly on the agent thing though, is that I am in the process of getting an agent right now; and I do think that it is pretty difficult not to have an agent. So, I don't want to give the impression that it's easy to do it without an agent but it's always worth also seeking any of these other possible avenues as well.

GP: It's funny our paths are sort of paralleled because I didn't actually have an agent when I first got interest in my book; and then, I signed with an agent before we did the whole contract thing.

So, I think, like, I am right there with you; I highly agree and think that agents are super important because, if anything, they get to play bad cop and you get to be good cop. And then you get to be like the author who's like fun and deals with the editors; and if something goes wrong, your agent could come in and be like, Shhh, and deal with that.

SS: Well, and I also felt like sometimes I was asking questions of my editor here and there; where I was like, if I had an agent, I probably wouldn't be asking this. So, I mean, I think they do play a really important role also in the process, especially the way it is, you know, just currently in the publishing industry. So, that's important.

GP: And so, in terms of the process itself, I mean, it sounds like because you reverted to an earlier iteration of the book, was there a lot of editing that had to happen? Like, once you signed with your



editor and that sort of thing, what kind of editing happens? I mean, what's it like editing a book that's the collection of poems versus a straight-up prose piece?

SS: Yeah, I would say that it felt really similar to editing a prose piece. I mean, particularly, in the sort of first stages. You know? I think the poetry aspect became much more important, and perhaps, more difficult in my opinion when we got to the copy-editing stage because so much of it was like, 'Ah, I can't change that because I had certain syllables' or 'I can't change that because--'

You know? It was like a lot trickier than I expected for that part just because I hadn't done that before. But in terms of the earlier stages of the editing, it felt really similar in terms of strengthening threads or that kind of thing. But it was pretty seamless though, actually. And I think it's because my editor and I really shared a vision, you know, which is always the closer that vision can be.

You know, you can't always be perfect but the closer that is the better, which is why, of course, it's so important to have matches and, you know, why we have to go through the whole thing in getting something published, where you do find someone who shares your vision.

It really gave me actually a different perspective on the publishing journey, because it's so hard you watch your book published so much, right? But from the other side of it, you can really see how it's so important to have that collaboration that it really is the right person who's working with it.

And that really, really helps strengthen the book because it was the kind of thing where sometimes I had feedback, and you know, I try to figure out, 'Okay, there's something wrong here, but I don't know what the person's saying.'

With Nikki Garcia, who's my editor at Little, Brown, she would say something, I'd be like, yes. It was that kind of thing where you're like, 'Yes, that's exactly what it needs,' and it just felt so wonderful. So, I actually really enjoyed the editing process because of that. It was just like the perfect set of eyes for seeing, just giving me that clue; and then I could strengthen something; or not as many changes as strengthening, I would say. But yeah.

GP: That was definitely my experience as well. Like, you know, when you have an editor who gets it, it's like they're just building on what you've already built and what you've already created. It's like it's not really fixing, it's improving, enhancing, and you know, shining a spotlight in just the right places.

The other thing that I thought was really interesting in what you were saying on the copy-editing side, like I would imagine that would be really hard because oftentimes, in poetry like punctuation is different, and you have repetitions of words and things like that. So, what does that look like?

Like you touched on it a little bit that like, you know, it's hard to change things because you have the right number of syllables in that line or something, you know, you need to use that particular word. How do you process copy-edits when you're doing something that is so refined in terms of the language as poetry?

SS: So, we started by me going through and marking as much as I could, but it was actually really hard because there's so much that I, you know, didn't really mark everything.

I tried to, but, you know, I was mainly marking certain kinds of things, particularly punctuation where I deliberately left out, left out, you know, punctuation, where I knew it was needed normally, and those kinds of things in order to make the flow happen the way I wanted to.



GP: Right.

SS: Or the line break was serving for it, or that kind of thing. So, I would say it was a combination actually between being really meticulous like that; and then, maybe by the end, letting things go a little bit, where I realized that a few cases, it wasn't as, you know, if I had one. If I had the comma, it didn't; and it was a slightly longer pause or not, it wasn't so essential.

So, there was a little bit of both, I think, being really, really stringent on certain things and trying to, if I was changing it, you know, go pretty intense on figuring out an exact fit, and then realizing for a few things that, reading it aloud a lot. A lot of reading it aloud in the copy-editing phase for me because that's where I could try to hear that.

And I think, you know, is that, 'Wait, am I just pausing that', because I'm saying it that way, or I mean, you could sort of get really in your head about it for certain cases; but then a lot of the cases were really important too.

So, I definitely had to mark a lot more stuff than I think most people have to. And then, I think we still have the same number of passes, but it was pretty meticulous; it was pretty meticulous.

GP: I love it. And I love that you can unpack it in that way so that like for listeners, it can be super helpful to hear kind of what that process can look like so that when they get there, they know a little bit more what to expect. So, what's next for you? You mentioned you're currently looking for an agent. What else do you have going on?

SS: As you said at the beginning, I write for all the ages from picture book up through YA. So, I always have a couple different things in all different stages going on at the same time. And I don't actually know which one will be the right thing to go out into the world next, but I'm just continuing with my looking for an agent; and hopefully, I'm getting close, I think. [laughs]

And then from there because there's, of course, that shared vision aspect of the agent too, I'll be sort of with that person deciding what should be the next avenue, probably. Yeah.

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

SS: Okay, I have one because it's my writing motto, and it's actually-- And I have to give credit because it was from one of my advisors at Hamline, what she taught me. And so, it's Phyllis Root from Hamline, and it's, no writing is ever wasted. And I take that in so many different ways, that help me so much.

So, one way is simply when I'm writing, it really, really helps me to get out of my head, get experimental, if I need to. I actually tend to not do that many writing exercises, so it encourages me with writing exercises. And then, a big one, of course, for a lot of people would be in revision. And, I can let go of-- I can let go of things in revision much easier because of it.

But I definitely believe it also because there's so many different ways that it's true. So, one way, of course, is that as we write, we continue to improve; so, it's not wasted in that sense that we're writing, and we're getting better, and we're getting better. And then, it's also true that sometimes, something suddenly appears – again, appears in something else, right?

I don't know if that's ever happened to you, but it's happened to me occasionally where suddenly, oh this character pops up or this theme pops up that was in something that it wasn't ever going to be published. So, I think it's helpful as a motto in freeing me up, basically, for all the different stages of writing.



GP: I love that. And you know, it's funny that you mentioned that that was your mentor who said it because there was a student at DIY MFA also named Phyllis, but different Phyllis, who used to say this all the time in our 101 classes; and like, that was sort of her motto that became kind of like a class mantra.

And I love that idea that no writing is ever wasted; for me, I often interpret it as not only are we improving and things pop up later and we can always reuse something, but there's also that idea that even if you never reuse a piece of writing, the process of going through that journey of writing that thing, has now gotten you to the place where you can write the thing that will go out into the world.

And so, it's like, it's part of our, not just like mechanics of improvement of the craft, but also our improvements and growth as human beings, that gets us to a place where we can write that other book or that other essay or that other poem.

SS: Yes, I absolutely agree with that because there's so much writing that's not on the page, right? Part of the writing life. That's absolutely true. Yeah.

GP: Exactly. I mean, there's so much that we need to sometimes process things and whatever we are doing, I mean, as writers, often, we process those things on the page, but it doesn't necessarily make it out into the world, but it gets us to where we need to be eventually, no matter what.

SS: Yes, I agree with that.

GP: It has been so much fun chatting with you today, Sonja. I feel like we could chat for like another five hours; but you probably have writing to do, and I probably have writing to do, and our listeners probably have writing to do. So, I just wanted to say, thank you, for being here today. This has been so much fun.

SS: Thank you so much for having me.

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

