

Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 3: Rachel Eugster – Episode Transcript

[0:00] Intro

[Crickets, music]

Welcome back to Cabin Tales for Young Writers. This is the season of interview leftovers. I'm Catherine Austen. And my guest today is Rachel Eugster, a picture book author and playwright, who's also an actor, singer, choral conductor, and co-founder of the indie theatre company, Bear & Co., many of whose plays I've seen at the Gladstone Theatre. Rachel is also a podcaster. She's the co-host of the Blue Vote Café podcast from Democrats Abroad. She joins us from Ottawa, Ontario – but not in real time. I interviewed Rachel by Zoom six months ago, on July 22nd, 2020. You heard snippets of that interview on the podcast last fall. And today you'll hear what's left over, edited into a 20-minute continuous segment in which Rachel shares her admiration of Shirley Jackson, her use of Scrivener as a writing tool, and her love of games, stories, and spindles. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:20] Interview with Rachel Eugster

CA: Do you read your own work out loud?

RE: Sometimes. Not habitually. I know many people do. In the years before you could just press a button on your computer on your phone and record yourself, I had a friend who is a poet, she would leave her house and phone her home phone and read her poem into her answering machine so that she could hear it out loud in her own voice. Nowadays we have many more tools that will allow you to do that. I don't want to say it's far more important for a picture book text to read it aloud, but a picture book text is meant to be read aloud. It's something that you want parents to read to their children. So I don't think I would ever submit a picture book text without reading it out loud first. But I don't think I rely upon what I hear when I read it to construct it. Don't know. That's an interesting question. But a novel? I can't imagine reading a whole novel out loud.

[2:10] CA: Okay, so onto characters. Do you do character outlines or interview your characters or, as you mentioned, write in your character's voice in a diary, that sort of thing, when you're drafting or at any stage in writing?

RE: Yeah. The book that I'm working on now, which is a middle grade novel, it's a funny book because it was born out of the need to have something to submit for a one-on-one critique for an SCBWI conference. I'd been submitting the same thing for a couple of years and I just wanted something new. And I had an idea and I just sat down and I wrote 5 pages or

something. And then after that conference I wasn't sure where to take the story. And so now I have this enormous Scrivener file with bits of chapters and cards that tell what's in each chapter in a whole outline that has pretty much gotten the character from the beginning to the end but there's a lot of middle bits that I haven't quite worked out yet.

I find one of my challenges in approaching this book, because it's unfortunately or characteristically a very complex piece, and I had not written, had not successfully written a novel before. I have a middle grade book in the bottom drawer that will never never never never see the light of day. But other than that, I hadn't written a novel. And I found the challenge of holding the whole thing in my head incredibly intimidating, especially because this book involves many layers and many moving pieces that I haven't quite figured out yet. I haven't figured out how the gears engage yet in many spots. So Scrivener I have found to be a helpful container because it does have, you know, I can put the chapter outline on a card that's associated with the actual text, and if I need to look at one and not the other I don't have to go scrambling through Word to figure out, Oh where did I put those thoughts. So yes I will say cautiously, provisionally, I think it is helpful. But I haven't brought a project to completion within Scrivener yet.

With a picture book it's easy to keep track of it, and with a picture book you can take the darn thing and like -- and I did this with *The Pocket Mommy* -- print it out, cut it in strips, paste it, you know, move it around on the floor, scribble on the strips, paste them back together and then go do that in the computer. I don't see how you can do that with a novel. I know some people do that kind of thing. And I know I'm looking forward to the point where I can even contemplate this. But I know some people do things like shrink the text down to a font that's so small you can't read it and then colour -- or I guess you have to shrink after -- but first you colour, you know, when a certain character shows up, when a certain artifact is used. And then you can see the balance when you shrink it with by looking at the colours. I think that's probably a really fun and useful exercise, but I don't know.

CA: *I guess it's finding your own devices that work for you, and maybe different ones for each book.*

RE: Yes, that seems to be the case too. Everyone who writes book says the only thing you learn in writing a book is how to write that book. And you have to learn how to write the next book all over again. Although I think we do learn as we go.

CA: *If you think you're not going to have a crisis of confidence again just because you've done it before, you're fooling yourself.*

RE: Exactly, yes. The crises of confidence are a given.

[5:45] CA: *All right. Do you have any feelings about comeuppance tales?*

RE: Yeah, I think that's probably where they belong -- around the campfire. I guess it depends on the tale, but if it's that simple it may not be interesting enough to sit and read off the page. I don't know.

[6:00] CA: *And what about sad endings? How do you feel about sad endings?*

RE: I think there's sometimes necessary. Sometimes as a reader I feel cheated. But I mean I think you want to feel that the story has ended in the only possible way it could have ended. And sometimes it has to be sad. Because you can also feel cheated by a happy ending, because I

do feel like the author has let the reader and the characters off the hook. It's funny, I have a writing tutee at the moment, she's 13 I think, and she's writing a book. And she had a central character nobly sacrifice himself at the end, and I was really impressed. And then she told me it was something I had said to her early on, that everyone can't end up, you know, it can't be happily ever after for everyone. I was impressed with the result. So maybe it was the right thing. And even in the ghost story where you survive, you know, seeing the apparition, maybe your hair turns white overnight or something. There's always, there's a consequence for everyone for sure. Otherwise it's not a satisfying story.

[7:00] CA: And when you're writing do you choose your words consciously to suit the mood or the effect that you want on the reader? Or do you just let it happen and then take care of that in revision?

RE: When I'm in the flow of writing I don't choose the words consciously. But I may set up the voice consciously, and then develop a flow with the voice, and then turn off the brain that thinks about what words it's choosing. I just let the voice itself speak. But there may be a little bit of conscious setting-up in creating the voice. Does that make sense? So I think it's a little of both. It's got to be. It's got to flow naturally, so if you just give it container.

[7:35] CA: So do you like the drafting the most, as opposed to planning and revising? Like, if you split it into three. Not that it's discrete but...?

RE: Yeah that's the thing. I like them all in different ways. Do I like the drafting the most? I mean I'm even thinking about, like, writing the right kind of letter. You know, like a letter to the editor or something. There's satisfaction in getting that passion down on paper. But then there's equal satisfaction in making sure that the way I've articulated the point is well expressed. And I do -- again I'm using the letter to the editor as a model -- when I realize I have to write it, I do some planning mentally, while washing the dishes or whatever, about which points need to be made in what order they need to be made. And so yeah, I think for me it's a package. I don't think I can break it down and say, I like this part better than that part. I like the way all three of those parts work together to produce something that you're proud of afterward.

[8:35] CA: And do you have a favorite point of view to write from?

RE: I don't think so. I have written from first and third. Have I ever done second? Maybe as an experiment but nothing that's really become a completed project. I don't think I have a favorite point of view. I think certain points of view suit certain projects and I feel like I know, through experimentation or whatever, it becomes -- not that I know, but it becomes obvious as you're working on a project, which is the right point of view to tell it from. So *The Pocket Mommy's* in third. I have another picture book in first. This current novel that I'm working on is in third. That one cannot be told in first. The only way to tell it in first would be to split it up and tell it from different characters' points of view. And I have enough complexity with that that I don't need to add that layer on. Yeah.

[9:20] CA: Have you ever written a monster story?

RE: I don't think so, no. I'm going to say no.

CA: What about a story with a curse?

RE: That would be great fun. No, I haven't.

CA: *And have you ever written about a split personality?*

RE: I haven't written about split personality, and I wonder if it's because my first encounter – okay, we're going back to when I was a kid again – but my first encounter with the concept was Shirley Jackson's *The Bird Nest*. She did it so brilliantly that -- and I've even reread it as an adult and I still agree with that -- I don't think it can be bettered. Just as I don't think her handling of suspense can be bettered. She can create suspense with the subtlest and, you know, the most seemingly insignificant detail. She's a master at suspense. And it's never beating you over the head, you know, glasses breaking suspense. It's insidious. She's brilliant. But yes. So imagine me at, I don't know, 13, reading this book, having never heard of a split personality. I was utterly, utterly captivated and fascinated.

[10:40] CA: *Excellent. Okay, and you haven't happened to have written an outhouse scene?*

RE: I haven't. But I have fairly deep acquaintance with outhouses [laughter], again going back to my childhood and for many years since.

[10:55] CA: *Did you tell stories around a campfire as a kid?*

RE: There were certainly stories told around the campfire when I was a kid. I don't know that I did much telling. If I told a story, it wasn't my own. It was repeating a story I'd heard at school or at another campfire. I always felt like I couldn't make up my own stories, I think. Not that I wasn't allowed to, but they just wouldn't come to me.

CA: *And what about as a parent? Did you and your kids ever do that sort of thing? Or did you have a bedtime story where you make things up rather than read?*

RE: We always read to the kids at bedtime. I don't think we made stuff up very often. We continued reading as they got older. And we read a lot of Shirley Jackson with them. We read all of the Moomintroll books. We read all of the Susan Cooper books. We read all of the LM Boston books. So yeah, we continued reading for a very long time. Actually, I started reading to my husband before the kids were born. So that's been a family-long pursuit.

It's funny because, just thinking about how times have changed. You know, even though I grew up in a literate society and my entire childhood was reading and books, it was in many ways an oral culture in a way my children's world is not. And we played a lot of games. Maybe that wasn't true for other people in my generation, certainly not our kids' generation. There's also a game we used to play that was, yes, it was called the story game. You can only play it with someone who's never played it before. You tell them, 'We've written a story and you're going to guess it. And you're going to guess it by asking yes or no questions.' And they're like, 'Oh I can't do this.' I'm like, 'Yes. Yes you can, yes you can. It's easier than you think. Just ask a question, just get started. And so of course the answers are in a pattern -- yes yes yes no -- whatever they ask.

CA: *So they're making up the story.*

RE: So they make up the story. It's a very good game. Yeah. And they're always so impressed with themselves that they were able to discern what was in your mind. And then at the end you say, 'So we have a secret: you wrote the story.'

CA: *I've never heard of the story game before. Is that like something your family made up?*

RE: I imagine someone else introduced it to us.

[13:15] CA: *And do you have a favorite scary story? You mentioned Shirley Jackson. Maybe one of hers? Or another one? Or a favorite scary movie?*

RE: You know, they don't tend to attract me. But yes I would certainly say, if you want suspense read Shirley Jackson. But I in some ways like the weirder stuff better of hers, like *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* -- that's not a scary book but it's such a good book. It's such a good book. And I read them, most of them I read as a very impressionable teen, early teen. No I don't think I do have a -- not that comes to mind -- a favorite scary book or movie.

[13:50] CA: *Do you have any phobias? Well, you mentioned you developed acrophobia in later life, as did I.*

RE: Yeah, that's the only one. I guess it is a phobia. I hadn't thought of it as a phobia. Yeah, I don't think I do otherwise. I mean, there are things I'm not excited to touch, like worms.
[laughter]

[14:05] CA: *And what about collections. Do you collect anything?*

RE: I do. I mean, I don't know if they're formal collections, but, well, books and CDs, Navajo weavings. We have quite a few of those, particularly -- we call them samplers but I don't know that they were meant to be samplers -- but they're very small weavings, like a foot and a half by a foot and a half. We have a whole wall of them in the other room and we have several put away. I have a very small collection of spindle whorls.

CA: Wow. Do you weave or spin?

RE: I spin. And I got fascinated by it. So the reason that we know that L'anse aux Meadows in wherever it is in the maritimes, you know, the Viking settlement. The reason we know it was a settlement and not just, like, a stop and use the restroom kind of place for the Vikings, is that there were spindle whorls there. That meant that women came and sheep came and they were meant to live there and, you know, it was meant to be a place where people were going to stay. And that fascinated me. And you can find spindle whorls from all over the world from ancient times made of all kinds of materials. So like I said, it's a small collection. It's kind of a beginning collection that I haven't put a lot of thought or time into. But when I see one on eBay occasionally I'll go, you know, I don't have one from ancient Colombia and they're not expensive. So yeah.

CA: *I would call that a collection for sure. And do you have a fondness for this story of, is it Sleeping Beauty who pricks her finger on a spindle?*

RE: You know, they say that. We're not at all sure it was a spindle because they don't tend to have a sharp point. And no, it doesn't give me a fondness for her, but it's a very good question. I think she was a resistant spinner, right? She didn't really, it wasn't something she was choosing to do.

[16:00] CA: *And you don't happen to be the 7th daughter of a seventh daughter?*

RE: Oh, wouldn't that be lovely?

CA: I know. I want to meet one.

RE: And thank you for putting it in inclusive terms because you always hear about the seventh son of a seventh son. I have wondered if there was some way to find a 7th somebody of a 7 somebody ancestor in my family tree but no there is no way. and it's it's possible but not likely.

[16:25] CA: All right so I'm going to say a few words and you say the first thing that pops into your mind.

RE: Oh god. Okay.

CA: Basement

RE: Attic

CA: island

RE: ocean

CA: fishhook

RE: snare

CA: fur

RE: cat

CA: cabin

RE: sanctuary

CA: curse

RE: blessing

CA: swamp

RE: miasma

CA: transformation

RE: glory

CA: and the last one is hunger

RE: want

CA: Excellent. I were a psychiatrist I would say that you have a very positive outlook on life.

RE: Yes but what about miasma? Right, and this is for your listeners who are going to be mostly teens.

CA: Yeah. Well, they probably are going to be nobody. [laughter] But you know, sure, we'll call them teens.

RE: Okay.

CA: Well, thank you so much.

RE: All right. Take care, Catherine.

CA: Bye.

RE: Bye.

[music]

[17:40] Rachel Eugster introduces herself

And in case you've forgotten who you're listening to, here's a last bit from the author in her own words.

[music]

RE: I'm Rachel Eugster. I'm a writer and editor and many other things, which makes it a challenge to introduce myself because I find I spread myself into so many different pursuits. As a writer, I have published one picture book, *The Pocket Mommy*, and a series of nonfiction books about food and nutrition. I'm also an actor and a singer and a director. And the intersection between the writing and the acting is an original play I wrote about Amelia Lanyer, who lived in Shakespeare's time. And I am very active with the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, volunteering as the Webmaster, with minimal technical talents, and attending every conference that our chapter organizes.

[music]

[14:45] Find out more about Rachel Eugster

You can hear more creative writing advice from Rachel Eugster on Cabin Tales Episode 1.5, "Author Interviews about Setting," Episode 2.5, "Author Interviews about Character," and Episode 8, "The Never-ending Story," about revision. If you haven't listened to the core podcast, you really should, because it's full of entertaining tidbits from multiple authors.

You can find out more about Rachel Eugster, her books, and her theatre work from her website at RachelEugster.com – that's E-U-G-S-T-E-R. You'll find links to purchase her excellent picture book, *The Pocket Mommy*, on the site. As well as being an artist in several fields, Rachel teaches behind the scenes in those same fields. So if you need an editor for your book, a dramaturge for your play, or a coach for your singing voice, you can use the links on Rachel's website to get in touch and ask for her help. And like most of the guests on Cabin Tales, Rachel does school visits to speak about creative writing, so get in touch with her to inquire about virtual presentations or workshops.

[music]

[19:50] Thanks and coming up on the podcast

And that's all from me for today. I'll be back next week with leftovers from my interview with Lori Weber, the poet, novelist, and short story author for young adults and middle-grade readers, who joins us from Montreal, Quebec. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]