

Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 2: Jan Coates – 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 Jan Coates, who's been writing for young readers for the past 20 years. Jan has published over 30 books, including picture books, middle-grade novels, and chapter books for emergent readers. Her 2010 novel, *A Hare in the Elephant's Trunk*, was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award. Her most recent novel, *The Hermit*, just came out this fall with Nimbus Publishing. In 2019, Jan published a picture book that she both wrote and illustrated herself. She joins us from Nova Scotia. But not in real time. I interviewed Jan by Zoom six months ago, on July 21st, 2020. You heard snippets of that interview on the podcast last fall. And today you'll hear what's left over, edited into a 15-minute continuous segment in which Jan shares her preference for first-person point of view, her dislike of horror stories, and her love of beach glass. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:20] Interview with Jan Coates

JC: So am I your first person or have you already talked to someone?

CA: *No, I'm an old hat at this. I did one yesterday. So you know, we got this.*

[laughter]

[1:30] CA: *Do you have a favourite setting from fiction, either your own books or other peoples'?*

JC: I don't think so. I'm more about the character, really. My novels, three of them anyway that I can think of offhand, are in real places. One of them is set in South Sudan, which I've never been to, but then one's set in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, one's set in Spring Hill. But I also like stories that could be anywhere, you know? It doesn't matter where they are kind of thing.

CA: *Yeah. I'm not setting-oriented either. First drafts are like people in a bubble.*

JC: Where do they live? Oh I don't know. [dog barking] Now my dog's going to bark.

CA: *Dogs are loving Covid.*

JC: Yeah. People are home all the time.

[2:10] CA: *All right, so characters. Favourite characters from children's books, either your own or other people's.*

JC: Yeah, this is an easy one. Yeah, I guess all my own, but otherwise I'm a huge Kate DiCamillo fan. If I could be anybody, I'd be Kate DiCamillo. Or be able to write like her. Favourites, who else did I write down? Oh yeah. Owen Meany as an adult character. Owen Meany is the book that I've read, you know, several times.

[2:40] CA: *Nice. And you do character development – do you write in your diary as your character or interview your character or do any sort of character sketches or do you just see what comes out as you draft?*

JC: Yeah, so I do a lot of thinking before I'm going to start but I don't necessarily write down details. And for sure I go through so many drafts. I'm very slow. You know, it takes me forever and that's probably – maybe if I did more character development beforehand. I don't know.

CA: *I don't know. I don't know that's there's a way to get many good novels done quickly. I don't know the key to that.*

JC: Yeah. The people who crank out five or six a year.

[3:20] CA: *And do you have any feelings about comeuppance tales?*

JC: Oh yeah, where they get the justice in the end?

CA: *Just desserts, yes.*

JC: I feel like because my novels are middle grade and middle grade doesn't do that so much. Do you know what I mean? Typically it's like you want to see a little bit of change in that, you know, if there's someone who deserves justice where they kind of change and maybe become a slightly better person or something. Comeuppance — wow, that is quite a word.

CA: *It's old fashioned. A lot of campfire tales, either the good guy dies or it's comeuppance for the bad guy. I mean, they're not very nuanced.*

JC: Yeah. In these days of such political correctness where we have to be so careful with everything. Like I have a novel and I had to take any reference to anything using the word 'crazy,' even things like 'crazy good,' like 'he's crazy good at playing badminton.' You know, I wasn't even saying it in a sense that it is derogatory, but just in the way that kids say it. Anything that may be derogatory towards any sort of disability or problem that people may have. You know, it's the same way as they've taken other words out of the lexicon. That's the way to do it, I guess. Yeah. And it's an easy fix once it's pointed out to you.

CA: *So what did you replace crazy with in the crazy good?*

JC: I had to do a fair amount of research just to kind of see, like what are plausible things that kids would say that don't sound completely not like what kids would say. So that was interesting. Sorry, now I forgot the question.

CA: *I think it was about comeuppance tales. Because when kids tell stories, they don't censor themselves that way.*

JC: Yeah, yeah. The bad guy always gets it in the end for sure.

[5:15] CA: *And do you have a favorite point of view to write from?*

JC: Yeah, definitely first person present. That's my comfort zone. And I think that's especially if I know the character, then I'm like okay, I have to write it in this. Now, for *A Hare in the*

Elephant's Trunk, because it was set a number, a few decades ago, and I was writing about an African boy, I could not do first person present obviously. So that's third person past for that one. But yeah, my comfort level, I think, is — I am an 11-year-old girl inside so it's easy for me to write that.

[5:45] CA: *Have you ever written a monster story?*

JC: No, I never have. Yeah. Maybe because I'm, yeah, I don't think I'm interested in monsters, I guess. But I like when I read novels that have monsters in them. What was the one, was it *Sweep* by Jonathan Auxier or whatever that guy's name is.

CA: *Okay, he did The Night Gardener.*

JC: About the girl who was this chimney sweep and she found this thing that was like an ash clump. It's really good.

[6:10] CA: *Have you ever written a story about a curse?*

JC: No. Nothing, nothing of the, like, even sort of in the fairy tale/ fantasy. Like I'm unfortunately a hard realist, I guess. Maybe I'd like to not be.

CA: *I found that my relatives from Nova Scotia had a little more supernatural curse-y-ness to them.*

JC: Yeah, definitely Cape Breton. Yeah. I grew up in Truro. So, a regular small town. And I don't read fantasy either, yeah. I only read the first book of Harry Potter, for example. I read it but I didn't choose to read the other however many there were. So. But my kids just loved it. And still do, actually.

[6:55] CA: *Have you had an unreliable narrator?*

JC: I don't think so. I feel like I spend a lot of time actually making sure that my characters are true to who they are... I don't think I could write a human monster. I don't think I'd be good at that.

CA: *You wouldn't want to do it in first person present, that's for sure.*

JC: Yeah. You would have to do a lot of research. But kids love monsters, you know. But maybe more funny monsters. You know, like Shrek. Like I guess Shrek is a monster, kind of, like an ogre or whatever he is. The Disney-fied monsters maybe.

CA: *Well, sometimes the idea of fighting a monster is easier*

JC: Like the superhero thing, yeah.

CA: *The real things that you fear, like whatever, your friends don't like you or your mother doesn't love you or, you know, really horrifying possibilities in childhood, somebody betrays you or you're all alone and you don't belong — it might be easier to try and put that into fighting a monster. I don't know.*

JC: Hmm. I probably should write spooky stories. We probably all should. [laughter] Kids either love them or hate them, right? I do remember doing that with my sister. Do you have a sister?

CA: *I have two, yeah.*

JC: Yeah, so my sister and I are just two years apart. But I remember one thing we always did when we were kids. You would just, like a simple thing would happen and you could be like, "Oh my gosh, do you think that he's breaking into her house?" You know how you could do that? And then you work yourself into a frenzy, like "Oh my God, I think he killed her!" or

whatever. You know, like Nancy Drew and all that stuff. We were always trying to look for a mystery. I think that was it.

[8:30] CA: Did you tell stories around the campfire as a kid? Did you ever have that experience?

JC: So I did go to overnight camp when I was probably like 9 or 10 or something, but I don't have any memory of it. But what I do have about that question is that my daughter – for some reason I sent my kids to overnight camp when they were 8 and 10. And I'm like, oh my god, that seems a little young. But we must have been desperate for a week off or something. I don't know. And when Shannon came home – she was 8 – and she did not sleep for like months because of the stories they told at this camp. You know, it was murder and you know in the woods around them. I was like no.

[9:10] CA: Have you just made up stories on the fly, like when you put your kids to bed or anything like that? That sort of storytelling spontaneously?

JC: Yeah no, because I'm not – I mean, our conversation here wouldn't indicate this, but I'm not a talker. Yeah, I think that's why I'm a writer, I guess. Because yeah, I'm not, you know, if I was at a party and there were a bunch of people, I'd be one of the quieter people there. So making up stories on the fly, I don't think I'd be very good at it. Yeah. I think I need to see it on paper or on a screen.

I feel like when you get up and have to start saying stuff -- of course, when you do school visits it's a bit, you know, because you've done it a few times so that's not so bad. But I remember when I first was doing school visits I was terrified. I'm a teacher by trade. I haven't done a huge amount of teaching but I am a teacher. But speaking is not so much my thing.

But writing has made me a better speaker. Because you have to do it. You have to sometimes do things in front of people. That isn't my first thing I'd like to do, but yeah. Especially writing for kids because, you know, you want to visit schools. I'm actually doing a character workshop on Monday. And I did one little Zoom thing. So it is possible, I realized, to do school visits through zoom. I mean it's obviously not you know your first choice.

[10:30] CA: So you're not into scary, but do you have a favorite scary story? Like you did mention...

JC: *Skellig* by David Almond – I then went on to read all his books – and then Nest, *The Nest* – I can't remember which – but I think by Kenneth Oppel. Yeah, just those two books were the only things I could think of. The same with watching movies. I would never choose a scary movie. I'm one with the pillow in front of my eyes, I'm that one. Movies when there's like too much suspense and too much scary music. So I couldn't think of one.

[11:05] CA: And phobias?

JC: Fear of water. And dying young. I say dying young; of course, now I just turned 60 this year.
CA: Dying.

JC: But from the time I was a small kid, I always had that. And I had a little baby sister who died when I was 7. Gee, 7 must have been a really bad year for me. That was the swimming lesson year too. I've always sort of had that awareness of our mortality.

CA: That's certainly something to fear.

[11:30] CA: And do you collect anything?

JC: Yes, I collect beach glass. Which Inverness, Cape Breton – I don't know if you know the MacLeods cottages in Inverness, Cape Breton – they have so much beach glass, it's insane. So you could just walk down with a grocery bag and get all this beach glass. But I asked them when we were checking out, I'm like, 'Why does this beach have so much?' And they're like, 'Oh, it used to be the dump a couple miles up the road.' It just shattered my – because I pictured shipwrecks, you know. The dump. Still fun. And anything second hand. I'm a big used clothing shopper. I have been my whole life.

CA: So am I, yeah.

JC: Yeah, used anything. It's just fun.

CA: It's like you're rescuing it.

JC: Yeah. Yeah.

[12:15] CA: How was it illustrating your own picture book?

JC: Oh yeah. I've never been artistic in my whole life but about three years ago I thought, I'm going to see if I can do this. And anyway, so I mean I feel like -- I did it just last summer actually and I already feel like I'm so much better and probably I should have waited a year. But it's just a story I loved and I wasn't finding a publisher and I was like, what the heck.

CA: I've thought of doing that because I do make, like, art quilts. It's just it would probably take about five years to illustrate a book that way.

JC: Yeah, that's the thing.

[12:55] CA: So I'm going to say some words, Jan, and you say the first thing that pops into your head.

JC: Oh my gosh, put on your psychiatrist hat.

CA: Okay. Basement

JC: Scary

CA: Island

JC: Prince Edward

CA: Fish hook

JC: Caught in your skin

CA: Fur

JC: My dog

CA: Swamp

JC: Swamp? Oh, creatures

CA: Transformation

JC: The first thing that came to my mind was Transformers the cars.

CA: Okay, sure. Hunger

JC: Pizza [laughter]

CA: Cabin

JC: Lake

CA: Curse

JC: A necessary evil. As in the swearing variety.

[13:45 Goodbyes]

CA: *That's great.*

JC: Well, that was nice having a chat with you.

CA: *Yeah, its really nice to talk.*

JC: If you ever come to Nova Scotia, the Annapolis Valley.

CA: *Okay, yeah, for sure. Thanks again.*

JC: It's great chatting with you. And good luck with your technology and all that.

CA: *Oh thank you, yes. I will muddle through.*

JC: *I'll go back to making masks.*

CA: All right. Bye.

JC: *Cheers. Bye bye.*

[music]

[14:15] Jan Coates 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.

JC: I'm Jan Coates. I'm a writer of books for young people. I live in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. I have two adult children, both of whom live in Ontario. My life goal is to live within an hour's drive of them. I love the outdoors. I love my dog, my husband, used clothing shopping, hiking. And I love of course reading and writing. And I guess that's it.

[music]

[14:45] Find out more about Jan Coates

In that last goodbye in our interview, Jan said, "I'll go make masks" because she was making Covid face masks as part of a fundraising initiative for her local food bank. And she had made over 3,000 masks. That is a generous spirit.

You can hear more creative writing advice from Jan Coates 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 brings many Canadian children's authors together virtually and feels kind of like a get-together.

You can find out more about Jan Coates and her books from her website at JanCoates.ca. She has gorgeous pictures of the beach and her dog, and her dog on the beach – it's a beautiful dog – and lots of great blog posts. My favourite is her post on the important

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books in her life, in which she says, “I do wish Dickens had been a little less wordy.” And there’s a photo on her website of George Clooney holding up Jan’s novel, *A Hare in the Elephant’s Trunk*, alongside Jacob Deng, on whose life the novel is loosely based. So that’s definitely worth a look.

Like almost all of the authors on Cabin Tales, Jan Coates makes virtual school visits, so use the link on her website to invite her into your school and learn more about Jan and her writing.

[music]

[16:15] 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 Rachel Eugster, a playwright and picture book author who joins us from Ottawa, Ontario. That’s next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I’m Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]