

Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 6: Karen Krossing – 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 Karen Krossing, who has been writing fiction and poetry since her teen years. She's the author of seven novels for children and young adults. She also writes short stories, published in two collections, and her first picture book is coming out this fall. Karen has an MFA in Creative Writing for Children and Young Adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She's been an editor, a writing coach, and a creative writing instructor. She joins us from Toronto, Ontario. But not in real time. I interviewed Karen by Zoom six months ago, on July 24th, 2020. You heard snippets of our interview on the podcast last fall. And today you'll hear what's left over, edited into a 20-minute continuous segment in which Karen shares her love for sad endings, her joy in writing unforeseen plot twists, and her advice for handling writers' block. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:20] Interview with Karen Krossing

CA: Do you typically know the ending of your story at the beginning?

KK: I would say yes and no. I know the major twists in the story but I don't like to work out the details. So I'll have sort of like a coat hanger with the fabric draped lightly over it, and I know the major points in the story that I want to hit. But the plot will evolve and become more detailed, will even change from what my original plan is, as I get to know the characters more, as I write more. But I usually hit those main points that I thought I was going to hit. I often don't know the ending. I know approximately what the ending should be, wants to be, but I don't have the details or how that's going to happen. Yeah.

CA: And that makes it a process of discovery.

KK: It's a process of discovery but it also has planning. I'm one of those middle-ground writers, you know, pantser versus plotter. I used to write to discover and not plot, but I think I ended up wandering in the forest of my story and getting off track on tangents that then just needed to be rewritten. So if I have a loose plan, then I can tell where I am in the story, know that I'm aiming towards, say, the act one climax. And I don't necessarily know exactly how I'm going to get there but I'm aiming that way. And I can feel where I am in the story, say, the tension needs to be rising here because we're getting to that big climax moment, so you're not going to put a scene in here that's going to be a quiet peaceful reflective scene with your character; you're

going to build. And I'm aware of the sort of bones of the story, the structure of the story, and what's needed that way.

[3:10] CA: Excellent. Do you have a favorite plot twist from your own work or others?

KK: I think my favorite plot twist – well it's definitely one that I don't know is coming, especially in my own work. I love when I think I know the plot of the story but when I start writing it the characters tell me a plot twist that I didn't know. I feel that those are the most authentic ones rather than preplanned ones. So I'll give you an example. When I was writing *Bog*, which I mentioned is a novel about a cave troll with a hatred for humans, I didn't know that he was half-human till his grandmother told him, revealed it to him. He didn't know and I didn't know. And he was crushed. And the story got so much more interesting and I was so energized and excited by that plot twist.

CA: That's great. I love that book.

KK: Thank you.

[4:00] CA: Do you have any advice that you would give to young writers who are sort of stuck in the middle of a story? So maybe they've wandered into that forest and they're lost.

KK: I have so many ideas about how to overcome writer's block. And I think you might want to use different techniques for different situations and you've got to figure out what one will work for you or try them all on and see which one actually helps. So one is: reread what you've already written on the story and sometimes that will give you trajectory, momentum to write the next scene. Another technique is: talk with a friend about why you're stuck. I do this a lot. One of my daughters is one of my most common people to discuss a stuck story with. And it's not really that I want people to tell me how to unstuck my story. I want them to listen as I resolve it myself. So there's a lot of 'mmm hmm,' 'uh huh,' 'well have you thought about this?' or 'what about this?' or 'why that?' And I unstuck myself through conversation.

A third technique is to write outside of the story. So you might write from a different character's point of view, or you might write a letter from one character to another, or ask your character questions and get them, ask them to answer them. Sometimes they don't cooperate; sometimes they do. Asking the characters what happens next and where they want to go, asking them 'did you not like that last scene? Do you not agree with this? Did I go off track from what you think the story should be?' and let them tell you what happens next.

A fourth technique is: get feedback from trusted friends or other writers about what you've written so far. They might have some insight. Often if I'm stuck, it might be because a couple scenes back I went off track with where my story needs to go. And I intuitively know I can't go forward but I don't know why. So somebody else's feedback can maybe point to those areas in the story that aren't quite working yet, maybe where I went off track. Another technique is to take a writing class or listen to a podcast about writing, to get some more techniques about how to write and that might solve your problem. If I can identify what the problem, the writing problem, is, I can sometimes move forward in the story.

Another technique is the put-it-in-the-drawer method. So, sometimes a story needs to go away and your subconscious will work on it and solve that problem for you. But before I put it in the drawer, I ask myself question about it, like what happens next? Maybe that's simply the question. And then I put it away. Sometimes it's just three days, sometimes it has to be 3

months. And then pull it out again. And I may not think that I know what happens next, but my subconscious has worked away on it, so if I go back into that story, reread it, try to write the next scene, something will come out of my pen or out of my fingers on the keyboard.

And my final bit of advice is to set a daily writing goal. It can be only 200 words. Write 200 words on the story each day or most of your days, so that you keep your head in the story, keep your subconscious thinking about the story, and then the next words come. If I write once a week instead of daily, I lose the beats of my story inside my head, in my subconscious, and they're harder to get back to. I have to get re—into the story each time. So a little bit every day works better.

[8:00] CA: Those are just wonderful suggestions. I can tell you do a lot of work with young writers to help them. Just a question about your personal feeling about endings. How do you feel about sad endings or endings where the good guy loses?

KK: I love them. [laughter] I love stories that feel real to me. And real life doesn't end neatly and happily. I mean it does sometimes, but in real life we're the heroes of our own stories. And if the heroes in our books always win, then I kind of start to expect that I should always win in my life. But that's never going to happen. So I want my stories to show heroes who grow and change but don't always succeed because I'm not going to. So.

CA: I love that. Yes, learning how to lose or how to cope with disappointment.

KK: Yes. If I see my characters coping with loss and disappointment and sadness, then maybe that will help me when I feel those things too.

[9:00] CA: Nice. And are any of your stories based on your own childhood?

KK: I think with every writer, every story we write has a piece of ourselves in it. The one that's most closely based on my childhood, I would say, is my collection of link short stories, *Take the Stairs*. It's based on my teen years and things that happened to me or people around me. I have been writing more stories recently that go more into my childhood rather than teen years. That's the one that I was talking about, the monster in the closet story. I used to lie in bed and not get to sleep very easily and imagine what was in the closet, what was creeping out of the closet, what was creeping up the stairs, and all of that sort of rich fear fantasy, I guess. So I've been exploring that in my work in progress.

CA: Did you – because I was a frightened child too. I used to give myself, or say that the monster or whatever would give me, 30 seconds to get to the bathroom, to get down the hall and to the bathroom and back in my bed, and then I'd be — like I used to have these techniques for staying safe...

KK: Yes, absolutely. There was a knight in armour on the stairs, on the landing of the stairs. So if I ran up quickly, when he chopped the axe down I wouldn't get murdered -- I suppose was my greatest fear. I kept my closet doors shut. They were two accordion doors. So if I opened one, got out a shirt, and shut it quickly, the closet goblins couldn't get there fast enough. They had to run down a long tunnel, and these gates would open the longer that the door was open. So if I went in quickly and out quickly, then they didn't get all the way down the hall to me. So, absolutely. Absolutely. I totally relate to what you said.

CA: And did you have a basement? Because I was really scared of the basement.

KK: Me too. And down there was a witch, in the laundry room which was, you know, the unfinished area. Yeah. And she was sort of the, I guess, queen of all the creatures of the house. I think she was the most powerful.

CA: *A childhood permeated by fear.*

KK: Fear that we create ourselves, from our own imaginations.

[11:20] CA: *And do you have a favorite point of view to write from?*

KK: So you're asking about first, second, third point of view?

CA: *Yeah. And past, present. Or multiple points of view. That sort of thing.*

KK: I have two favorites. I like first person because it's so immediate, and that story camera is basically, you know, right inside that character's body. So when you're looking around as a reader, you're in that person's body and living each moment. But my other favorite is third person close, because the camera is just, the story camera's just a little bit away from that protagonist, so you get a little bit of insight into that main character that you can't get in first person. And that distance is really interesting. So you can, as a writer, observe that main character and give insights that maybe they don't quite see or understand themselves. Right? So if the camera is beside the main character, maybe you can see that there's a ghost standing behind them and the main character doesn't know that yet. And that creates suspense. But if you are in first person, and the camera's right inside the character, you don't see that ghost until you turn around, or the main character turns around and witnesses it first hand. So there's a difference there. And as a writer, it's a really conscious choice to make about how close you want to be to your main character, I think. I like present tense for its immediacy, but past can give – again, like third person -- it can give that place where you can observe or reflect. So if this happened, this story happened to me a month ago, I have a little bit of a different perspective on it than if it's happening to me right now. All my emotions are so immediate. And sometimes if there is some reflection time, there can be more depth.

CA: *So do you let the story determine the point of view?*

KK: Yeah. I'll write it, sometimes I'll experiment with writing it in a couple of different ways and then give it to a few readers, maybe give them a couple of different ways and ask them which one pulled them in more.

[13:35] CA: *Have you ever written a story about a transformation?*

KK: A transformation. I was thinking that every main character transforms in some way, so I feel like, yes, all of us writers are always writing a transformation story. Something that literally morphs into, physically morphs into something else? No but that sounds exciting.

CA: *Have you ever written about a parasite?*

KK: No but that sounds fun. There's a duality there. It makes me think.

CA: *And what about a split personality?*

KK: I feel like we have many identities, many roles in our lives. So I feel like, not a split personality but a many faceted personality, that we evolve and change in our lives. So I feel like our characters are all like that. They're all many faceted, many roles in their stories.

[14:40] CA: *Did you tell stories around the campfire as a kid or in another venue, like a story telling off the cuff situation?*

KK: I feel like it was the listener, not the teller around the campfire. The darkness is closing in, the fire is warm and bright, and somebody is telling me something that's supposed to scare me – and will scare me, will terrify me. Because I'm not that great at, you know, spontaneously making up a story. And I'm more introverted. So I'm not the one usually performing the story. I'm listening to it, enjoying it.

CA: *There's a world of difference between storytelling and writing.*

KK: There is. Novels make great movies, I think, because the author has done the deep work to understand who the characters are and why they're doing what they're doing, and then it becomes easier to transfer that onto the screen, I think.

[15:40] CA: *So do you have any favorite scary movies?*

KK: One that really creeps me out is *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman's book and movie as well. Those button eyes – they're terrifying. But I hate picking favourites because there are so many great stories that it's hard to say this one is my favorite.

[16:00] CA: *Do you have any phobias? Well, closets. Would you say – no, you will get your shirt out so you can do it. Do you have any other phobias?*

KK: I think that the fear of going to school naked as a kid would be just as big as not getting my shirt out of the closet. So, phobias. Right now I feel like my phobia is germs, as we're living through this pandemic and washing our hands and staying distant from people and wearing masks. It's this sort of awareness of: *there are germs on things*. Right? It's not stopping me from doing things, so I'm not sure if a phobia is when you are completely overtaken by a fear?

CA: *I developed a phobia in my 30s. It's like a rush of adrenaline. There's a reason why it's classed as a mental illness. It's, yeah, it's not rational.*

KK: Yeah. So I think I don't have phobias then. I have large fears.

CA: *But you've built a very successful life around these large fears.*

KK: I think going to the dark places in our own lives brings great story material.

[17:10] CA: *Do you collect anything?*

KK: I don't collect anything physical. I mean, I collect ideas, story ideas, dreams, passions, wishes, hopes. I've been going through a process of trying to live more simply, and keeping essentials. So, books are essentials. But I don't collect things. Memories.

[17:40] CA: And you don't happen to be the 7th daughter of a 7th daughter?

KK: But I wish I was because that would feel really special, maybe magical. I mean, have you talked to anybody who is?

CA: *I haven't found one. One of my aunts was the 7th daughter, but not of a seventh daughter. I'd like to meet one.*

[18:00] CA: *And for the last thing, I'm going to say a few words. This is not a psychiatric evaluation. And you just say the first thing that comes into your head.*

KK: Okay.

CA: *Basement*

KK: dark

CA: island

KK: forests

CA: fish hook

KK: blood

CA: fur

KK: troll

CA: cabin

KK: smoke

CA: curse

KK: omen

CA: hunger

KK: fangs

CA: swamp

KK: muck

CA: tumble

KK: somersault

CA: transformation

KK: clouds

CA: Lovely. And that's it. You passed. [laughter] I thank you again, Karen, for your time. Thank you so much.

KK: Okay. I'm wishing you the best for the project.

CA: Okay thanks. Bye bye.

KK: Bye.

[music]

[19:00] Karen Krossing introduces herself

And in case you've forgotten who you're listening to, here's an introduction to the author in her own words.

[music]

KK: I'm Karen Krossing. I'm an author for kids and teens. I write short stories, novels, picture books. I write because I'm fascinated by words, by the way they can make people laugh or cry or inspire them to do great things. And I want to use the power of words to do good in the world.

[music]

[19:30] Find out more about Karen Krossing

You can hear more creative writing advice from Karen Krossing on Cabin Tales Episode 1.5, "Author Interviews about Setting," Episode 2, "Nasty People Meet Nasty Ends," 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 lots of fun and you learn so much from so many great Canadian writers.

You can find out more about Karen Krossing and her books and her editorial and mentoring work from her website at KarenKrossing.com. You'll find her latest news and some great cartoons on her blog, where she posts her own "Can't Draw Komics" about the writing life. Like most authors featured on Cabin Tales, Karen makes virtual school and library visits. You'll find a detailed description of her author presentations and creative writing workshops on her website, along with email links that you can use to invite her into your school and learn more about Karen Krossing and her work.

[music]

[20:30] 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 Tim Wynne-Jones, the multi-award-winning author of 35 books who is also a creative writing instructor and a musician. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]