

Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 10: Wendy McLeod MacKnight – 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 Wendy McLeod MacKnight. She's the author of three books for middle-grade readers: her first, *It's a Mystery, Pig-Face!*, debuted in 2017. In 2018, she published *The Frame-Up*, which received a starred review in *Booklist*. Her latest novel, *The Copycat*, about a girl who can shape-shift, came out last March. But Wendy actually wrote her first novel at the age of 9. She joins us from New Brunswick. But not in real time. I interviewed Wendy by Zoom on August 24th, 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 Wendy shares her habit of drafting quickly and revising painstakingly, her advice on getting to know your characters before you write them, and her delighted surprise at discovering Voldemort under Quirrell's turban. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:15] Interview with Wendy McLeod MacKnight

CA: *Do you ever do object studies, either as an exercise or has an object ever figured in one of your books?*

WMM: Oh yeah for sure, because sometimes I just do this because it helps me with description. You know when I'm trying to do something that's very descriptive, an object is extremely helpful. I think though that probably my most intense was when I was writing about the paintings at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery because basically they all exist. I cast them just like I would cast a movie. I always knew who the main character was going to be because there was always this painting called "Mona Dunn" that is oddly reminiscent -- or maybe not oddly at all reminiscent -- a bit of Mona Lisa. And it's very kind of creepy. And I found that, you know, really writing about the actual painting itself and then what else happened on the day that the paintings were done. So, for each of the paintings that I did, I've got pages and pages of things

that I needed to do really to get a handle on each one of those paintings -- 95% of which never appears in the book. But I find that those are really great ways to get your imagination going and start looking at the world differently.

Because, I mean, the paintings coming to life -- like that's not a new idea, right? You know, I took it from more of a sociological perspective. Like how would all of these paintings who've been stuck in this art gallery together live together for years and years and years and what kind of rules would they come up with and how would they work together to try not to get caught. The idea was what would it be like to be stuck in the painting, you can't get out, and then what if you made a friend who has not the greatest home life and is an artist, and wishes they could get into the paintings because wouldn't life be easier. He can't get in; she can never get out.

CA: *Okay, so you have that inner question as well as the—*

WMM: Outer question.

CA: *They've got to go together.*

WMM: Yeah. Exactly. But I do find that when you start thinking about things like that, then it becomes more interesting. So that's one of the things that I recommend is to really drill down into the character's internal and external struggle through it all. Which is hard I think a lot for kids, right? Because they're just learning about those internal struggles themselves. Or to name it I guess, maybe. Everybody has internal struggles from the time they're little, but they don't think of it like that. But I do feel like that combination is absolutely critical.

[3:50] CA: *Do you have any favorite plot twists, either from your own work or from a piece of fiction that you like?*

WMM: I have to say, I really enjoyed the moment when I discovered that Voldemort was up in Quirrell's turban, I think that is one of the best little plot twists that I have ever read. I just love that. But that element of surprise where you're not expecting something. I mean at the very least I was expecting maybe Quirrell was Voldemort. But no. I mean, so I just thought that was brilliant. So that's still probably my number one, right up there with "Luke, I am your father" you know? I can remember being in the movie theatre with that was playing and everybody gasped.

CA: *Okay, yeah. Surprise.*

WMM: Yeah, surprise is great. Like find something that makes everybody go "Oh." The very ending of *The Frame Up* solves a problem between my two main characters perfectly. And I knew it was always going to happen but people have come to me since then and said, "I did not see that coming." Like yes, that's so great.

[5:00] CA: *What about endings? How do you feel about sad endings or endings where the good guy loses? Like you write middle grade. Some people play more with sad endings for young adults.*

WMM: Yes. I would say that I love a sad ending first of all. I think that in middle grade, even if it's sad there has to be hope. You know, like I think about Kate DiCamillo's books, especially her last three that have just been so. And it's not all a happy ending. There's some real tension and you don't exactly know how things are going to turn out for that main character. But she gives us hope as a reader, which I think that elementary middle-grade kids really do need. I think

though, once you get into YA, then I think you've got a lot more flexibility. Sometimes those sad endings, that is how life is, right? When I read too many books like that, I usually need like a palate cleanser, like give me something funny. I can't remember what book I was reading a couple of years ago it was so sad, and then I have an author friend, Jonathan Rosen, his book I read it right afterwards which was *Night of the Living Cuddle Bunnies*. It's basically cuddle bunnies as zombies now, running around the town killing people. And it's quite scary actually, super spooky, but it's hysterically funny too, right? You need a bit of that. But I think that we do kids a disservice when things are too easy and don't cause pain, you know.

[6:40] CA: *Will you stick with middle grade?*

WMM: Well I love middle grade. I'm obsessed with middle grade. And I think it's probably because the books that I read when I was in middle grade are still the books I find great comfort in now as an adult. And if I'm having a really bad day, those are the books I want to read. I think I reread the entire *Anne of Green Gables* series in the hospital when my mom was dying. Like they're just books that stick with you, right? And they're the books that you're picking out, whereas before that other people, whether it's your teachers or your parents or your librarians, they're picking books out, but now you're picking them out. So I think that they become even more important. And you have to see yourself in them, you know. And I think that even that's part of the reason why the first few books I've written, I set in New Brunswick. I'd never seen books set in New Brunswick, like when I was a kid reading I remember the first time I read *Anne of Green Gables* when I was a kid and thinking, I've been to Prince Edward Island, like you can set books in places in Canada. Like I love books set in Canada. I love like if it's in Newfoundland or Ontario or, you know, wherever it is. I just love New Brunswick. I find New Brunswickers are very friendly, very enthusiastic. Nobody knows about us. They drive through us. And I think that there's a tremendous amount of beauty and wild spaces here, compared to lots of other places. I don't know, I always think we're just like this little gem that eventually everybody is going to discover. And we'll be kind of proud that they do but then we'll be kind of mad that they do too.

[8:15] CA: *Do you have any favorite settings from other people's fiction?*

WMM: Oh my gosh. I love really amazing worldbuilding. So, like Phillip Pullman's worldbuilding in *The Golden Compass* and all of those books, they just gobsmailed me. I thought that *Sweep* – oh my gosh, I could live in that world. I mean, I could live in anything that was kind of Dickensian. Like Charles Dickens is one of my favorite authors. I love anything where I feel like I'm there. And that's really hard for me to do, honestly. Like those kinds of place descriptions. It's probably easier setting them in places that I know than setting them in places that I don't. And you also have to be really careful, especially when you're writing for kids, to not get bogged down in so much minutia that they get bogged down with you. And that's not fun as a reader, right? I really love books set in Canada. You know, I've been all across the country and I just think it's just such an amazing and interesting country. But I love, especially in historic books, if you can give me the scene so that I get it. Yeah, I love that.

[9:25] CA: *And do you have any favorite fictional characters?*

WMM: Oh yeah. For sure Meg Murry from *A Wrinkle in Time*. I love Meg. I love Anne of Green Gables and *Emily of New Moon*. I love David Copperfield, he's like one of the greatest characters of all time. There's just so many characters that are just so astounding, right? The main character in *The War that changed my Life* by Kim Brubaker Bradley, that character stayed with me for so long.

[10:00] CA: *And are there any setting or character exercises that you would recommend to young writers?*

WMM: I always tell them that they need to interview their main characters.

CA: *And do you do that yourself?*

WMM: I do that myself. I do an interview. I have questions for them. And I'm always surprised by what they say. Because so many times, like with kids especially, it's like what they look like. You know, it's those things like what are they afraid of, what do they love, what would they be willing to do anything for, all those things that make up all of us, right? What frailties, what keeps them awake at night. And then the more mundane things like what's your favorite kind of ice cream, what do you like to do on a Saturday morning? Like I have all of these things. And I find that by the time I get through that, then I really do start to know the character. And I do that a lot with settings too. Like I just start listing all of the things that I want to talk about about the setting. It makes it a lot easier. And I think that one of the challenges I think that kids really have is trying to do the worldbuilding, right? And the character building. And that's so tough. I mean, you know, we've all read adults who struggle with that, right? I struggle with that in the first few drafts. Like how do I make this feel 3-dimensional as opposed to flat cursory or whatever. And so the more you can know your characters and the more you can know the place before you start. I'm not as tough on -- you know where people say "all five senses in every chapter" -- I think that's kind of ridiculous thing. But like life is a sensory experience, right? So that's always really helpful to, like, what is the character hearing? Are they hearing anything? And then the kids will go, "I didn't even think about that." So I think those are really fun exercises.

[11:50] CA: *So drafting and revising. While you're drafting, do you do self-editing or do you just let it out?*

WMM: I get it all out. So I always have to remind myself that it's probably going to take me 8 drafts and I just don't, I'm not going to worry about it anymore. You know, whether somebody likes your book or not is a personal thing. Everybody's got different taste. But it has to be well written. You know? And people send books out to publishers to query them and they don't even think it's the best it can be yet. At the very least the author has to think it's the best that they can do at that moment. And somebody else may obviously give them advice, right? And there's always an answer. That's the one thing I always say to kids: there's always an answer. It may not show up exactly when you want it to, and you may have to do all kinds of things. Or get advice from friends, you know? Just say 'I'm stuck at this point; what do you think' That's a great thing and kids tend not to do that because I think they feel a bit shy. I feel a bit shy about that, right? You know, like anybody whoever sends their work to their critique partners is always kind of like "ahh, please let them not hate it." And then when I send it to my agent, that's a whole other level of neurosis. But we owe it to ourselves and to our readers to make it

the most true manifestation that we can make it. But then it gets, by the time it gets to where it needs to get to, like I'm usually kind of gobsmacked. And I never feel like, sometimes at the end of the book -- and I don't know whether you've ever experienced the same thing which is, like somebody wrote this book and I don't know who it was. I know I was there. I'm not sure that they didn't take over at some point. There are moments when the characters on your page sometimes feel more alive than the people that are around you. You know? And that's a really weird thing to try to say to people. But I say that a lot to kids and say, like that's the magic.

[14:00] CA: *So you've said you spend a lot more time revising than drafting.*

WMM: Yes. I mean, I write full time, so I could get a first draft done within probably six weeks. If it's you know, if it's anywhere between 50 and 80,000 I can probably get that. Like usually when I'm really into writing, I'm writing like 2500 to 3000 words a day. But it's also, they're not good words. It's just getting it all out, right? So very fast first drafts, very very very slow revisions.

[14:35] CA: *And do you have a favorite POV to write from?*

WMM: I love first person. I find it very immediate. But there are some books that are very difficult to write first person. Like in *The Frame Up*, I have dual points of view, like half of the chapters are from Sergeant's POV, the boy, and half are Mona's, the girl in the painting. The Copycat it's all from Alli's perspective. I think third person gives you more freedom. But I think first person depending upon the situation. And maybe because my first book was really me, I mean I really put myself right back into those times and kind of wrote from that perspective. But I don't think I could ever write second person. I've tried before. I'm not very good at that. And I've never been able to do omniscient either.

[15:30] CA: *And have you ever written an unreliable narrator?*

WMM: Not in the typical sense of an unreliable narrator. I mean, certainly in my first book Tracy is an unreliable narrator because everything is how she experiences the world and she's not particularly, I don't know, she misses a lot of things. She's got her own agenda, right? Because when I read unreliable narrators, I'm just besotted with them. I think they're just so much fun. And you start to question everything. So I don't know. I think that would be fabulous. I have been toying with that, so that may be something in the future.

[16:10] CA: *And you have written about siblings.*

WMM: Yes. *It's a Mystery Pig-Face!* is about a brother and sister, it's really the push pull, like the "I will protect you till the death but you're driving me crazy" kind of thing. And particularly because of the book, the main character, Pig-Face -- and I do not espouse, by the way, name-calling -- but I did use it in this particular story because my brother, when we were kids, used to just torture me. Although I think I'm in almost all of my books in some way. I think that authors, it's really hard for us to separate, right? I mean it's how we experience the world. One of the things that I'm always really conscious of, too, is how I write the relationships with parents. Because the older that we get as children, the more we discover the horrifying secret that our parents are human beings too and sometimes that makes them a little flawed in our eyes, right? And so I think there's probably a bit of me in some of the parents as well. So it's kind of a

weird little mixture going on. And I've often thought, like the best thing that's ever happened to me in my life is becoming a parent, and then the worst thing that's ever happened to me in my life is becoming a parent because I got a lot more paranoid about a lot more things after I had children.

CA: *Of course, yes, because you're so afraid for them.*

WMM: Yes exactly. So that's a whole other phobia, I guess.

[17:40] CA: *Okay. And what do you think is scarier: humans or monsters?*

WMM: Humans, yeah. Unfortunately humans. I think you know, we have a lot of people who are very damaged. And yeah, I think that people can do really cruel things to other people, and not always just physical, you know. Certainly in my old job and things that I saw and -- I would rather take my chance with a monster. I think I might have a better luck in some cases. But having said that, I do feel that most people are redeemable. And the human monsters I met are almost always products of situations where they needed people when they were very young and they didn't have those people. And that's probably the same with most of the monsters too, right? If they had a really great monster mom and dad or a really good monster friend, maybe they would have taken, they would have been like, what's that character in The Muppets, Sweetums. Maybe they would have been sweetgums.

[18:40] CA: *All right. And did you tell stories around a campfire as a kid?*

WMM: I did. I mean I was a good Brownie and good girl guide and I also talked a lot, so I was like the perfect person to kind of tell stories. And usually they were spooky stories, right? Like you'd be on some overnight trip and you'd all be trying to freak each other out, to terrify each other before you went off to your tents. And I don't know. I was usually more on the receiving end of the terror though, because I am such a scaredy cat. Such a scaredy cat. If I'm watching a scary movie, I have to watch it in the daytime. It has to be early enough in the daytime, and then I have to do a bunch of things before I can go to bed because if not, I'm going to be thinking about that.

[20:00] CA: *All right. Do you have a favorite scary movie or scary story?*

WMM: In terms of scary books, I thought Jonathan Auxier's *The Night Gardener* was so creepy, so great. I just love that book so much. But I was scared in certain parts of it. And in terms of movies, I'm going to go really old school. I can remember being a kid and at some point -- it wouldn't have been when the movie came out, but at one point -- seeing *The Exorcist*.

CA: *The Exorcist, yeah. That was terrifying.*

WMM: Even now, if I hear the music I can go right back there. Oh yeah. When she's going up the stairs backwards? Oh. Like still. Now I'm going to have to watch something funny before I go to bed tonight, just thinking about it.

CA: *And yet you still give it a go. You'll still go for the scary books and movies.*

WMM: I know, that's right, yeah. You can't help it, yeah. There's something thrilling to get through that with the characters.

[20:30] CA: *Do you collect anything?*

WMM: I do. I love rocks oddly enough. I've always collected rocks. I love really smooth beautiful speckled or banded rocks. There is a beach in New Brunswick, in Saint Martins, right outside of Saint John, but I think it's probably got one of the best rock beaches ever. Because the water is so cold in the Bay of Fundy and the tides are so strong that what they do to the rocks is just so amazing. So I've got like a big stack of those. And if I ever see anything while I'm out about The Wizard of Oz, I almost always pick something up and bring it home because I love that movie so much.

CA: And then that's it. You've been great.

WMM: No, it's really fun. It's so great to meet you too.

CA: Oh, it's so nice to meet you. I kind of want to interview everyone I know because you get to know them so well.

WMM: It is a really fun thing to do, I do agree. It's fun to talk about writing too. Nice to meet you.

CA: Nice to meet you too, Wendy. Bye.

[21:40] Wendy McLeod MacKnight introduces herself

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

[music]

WMM: I'm Wendy MacLeod MacKnight. I am the author of three middle-grade novels: *It's a Mystery*, *Pig-Face!*, *The Frame Up*, and *The Copycat*. *The Frame Up* has been published in Taiwan and is currently being translated into French and is going to be published in French in the next year. I love middle-grade fiction so much. My heart is just embedded. And I love writing about where I live, which is New Brunswick, but I also love writing about all over the world too, because this is an amazing time to be an author right now.

[music]

[22:30] Find out more about Wendy McLeod MacKnight

You can find out more about Wendy McLeod MacKnight and her books from her website at WendyMcLeodMacknight.com. There you can read her blog and follow a link to the first three chapters of *The Frame-Up*. Like most guest authors on Cabin Tales, Wendy makes school and library visits, so use the contact form on her website to invite her into your school for a virtual presentation or writing

workshop, and learn more about Wendy McLeod MacKnight.

[music]

[23:00] Wendy on Cabin Tales

You can hear more great creative writing advice from Wendy McLeod MacKnight on Cabin Tales Episode 3.5, “Author Interviews about Inspiration”; on Episode 4, “Bad Things Happen,” about plotting; on Episode 6.5, “Author Interviews about Beginnings,” and on Episode 8, “The Never-ending Story,” about revision. If you haven’t listened to the core podcast, you really should, because each episode brings several children’s authors together to dive into its subject.

[music]

[23:35] Upcoming National Public Reading

And if you like the spooky stories on Cabin Tales, you can join me for a National Public Reading this coming Tuesday, March 16th, at 9 a.m., when I’ll be telling a tale or two to some local students in a virtual visit funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and administered through the Writers’ Union of Canada and the National Readings Program. Though it’s with a local school, this is a public reading, so drop me an email at cabin@catherineausten.com or use the contact form on the website at CabinTales.ca to ask for the zoom link if you want to listen in.

[music]

[24:10] 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 Philippa Dowding, the award-winning children's author, poet, and musician, who joins us from Toronto. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]