

Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 12: Ishta Mercurio – 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 Ishta Mercurio. She's the author of the highly acclaimed picture book, *Small World*, published in 2019, and she's the co-author of the non-fiction book for young readers, *Bite into Bloodsuckers*. Ishta joins me from Ontario – but not in real time. I interviewed her by Zoom on August 25th, 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 Ishta shares her favourite first lines, her love of characters that push the boundaries of expectations, and her penchant for telling truths through metaphors. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:05] Interview with Ishta Mercurio

CA: *Have you found a difference before and after Small World was published, in terms of how you feel about your work?*

IM: Yes and no. In terms of how I feel about my work, actually I felt -- especially when *Small World* had just come out – I felt an intense pressure to meet a certain bar. You know, when I was writing *Small World* and editing it and before it was actually published and came out and people started responding to it – you know, it made NPR book concierge best of 2019 list – that was wonderful but at the same time I felt an intense pressure that now there was a very solid level that I needed to reach in all my future work. And that was quite intimidating. And for a period of time it was stifling in a way. Like I would write something and know that it was good but not be sure that it was good enough. I feel like this is one of those things that's just kind of baked into being an author, you know. I have a project on submission right now that, you know, the response from editors is 'This is beautiful and lovely but we just don't have room on our list for it right now.' And that for me is the hardest part of being a writer: that you can write something that is good, but that doesn't mean that it's going to be published.

[2:25] CA: Have you ever based the story on the news? On a news story or history?

IM: You know what? I haven't. I probably should, especially now. There's a lot of material.

[laughter] But I haven't. Actually that's not quite true. I am working on a story right now that is inspired by the news, but not directly based on the news. You know what I mean? What I'm learning about myself is that I write much more through metaphor. And so, writing something that's directly and obviously inspired by the news is kind of, it's too much of a straight line. Like I like to kind of take a more winding path, to take that news story and expand it into something that's relevant in a bigger or more general way. So yeah, I'm working on something that's, the kernel of it came from what was going on in the world, but you probably wouldn't know that once this book's done. You won't be able to tell what news story triggered it.

[3:25] CA: What about another place that often writers get inspired by is other stories, either classic myths, fairy tales, Shakespeare, or more contemporary works. Have you ever written anything that was inspired by -- or do you hope to write something inspired by --

IM: Yes. Yes I have, yes. And for a long time it was really bad because it was clearly derivative. And I'm glad that I had reached a point in my writing development where I could tell that it was derivative and I didn't try to send it to people. And I just let it sit for a while until I figured out how to make it into my own story. Yeah.

[4:05] CA: Do you ever do object studies or have any of your stories ever included memorable objects, any objects have figured in in your writing?

IM: Yeah that happened in *Small World* a lot actually. Well, because Nanda is really, she's really interested in the juncture of math and science where, you know, they're both very interlinked. And so Nanda spends a lot of time in her book – in the book about her. (In her book!) You know, she notices patterns in nature and patterns in the world around us, and those patterns often take shape, like swirls and spirals and the branching of snowflakes and that fractal pattern in snowflakes. And so there are a lot of objects studies embedded in *Small World*. A lot. I do whole school visits just about the shape progression in that book. Yeah. It's a lot of fun.

[4:55] CA: *Do you have a favorite first line?*

IM: Yes, yes I do. Well I mean, my favorite first line is *my* first line in *Small World*. So, *Small World* opens with this line: *When Nanda was born, the whole of the world was wrapped in the circle of her mother's arms. Safe, warm, small.* So that's the first line of *Small World*. And the story comes back around to that line. And before I wrote *Small World*, my favorite first line was MT Anderson's first line in his book *Feed*, which everybody should read because we are so plugged into the Internet right now and in the world of *Feed* everyone is quite literally plugged into the Internet. Like literally at the base of their skull there's a thing that plugs them into the Internet all the time. And the first line is: *We went to the moon to have fun but the moon turned out to completely suck.* And there's just so much packed in there, in the sense that, you know, what world is this that they can just casually go to the moon on a Friday to have fun because they feel like it? The moon turned out to completely suck, which is like what world is this where there is no novelty even in going to the moon? And the moon, which seems like it could be really interesting and amazing, actually is boring. And there's just so much packed in there. But also again, it's a first line that encompasses so much of what the story is about. And going to the moon becomes a metaphor for technological advancement, and it turned out to completely suck. This whole wonder world of being plugged into the Internet all the time turns out to completely suck. It's such a dense sentence. And those are the best first lines. The best first lines are dense, where the first line is actually the kernel of what the entire book is about. Yeah.

[6:55] CA: *Do you have any favourite settings from your own work, like works in progress?*

IM: You know what? And this is weird. But my favorite – I love reading historical fiction, and what I love about reading historical fiction is the details. And this is another thing about setting: you have to be specific in order to make the setting meaningful, but the specific details you pick out need to be the details that amplify the character and amplify the theme of your story. And so I always pick up on, like there's a historical fiction series where one of the characters is a healer, and so the details that fascinate me are the details like, you know, 'I boiled willow bark to make a tea to bring their fever down.' You know, like stuff like that where it's like, 'Oh, the

main ingredient in aspirin actually comes from the bark of the willow tree. Like stuff like that, just those little weird factoids that swim around in your brain that you glom onto and you're never going to be able to use them. I am never, I am never going to go out into the world and find a willow tree and cut off a piece of bark and boil it to make my own homemade aspirin. Like that is never going to happen. But at the same time, it's details like that that really bring a setting to life. And setting is more than just place. It's also time period, you know, what is the weather like. All of those things. And so yeah, my favorite settings – maybe because the current world is *too* current and when I read, what I'm really doing when I'm reading is I'm escaping. And so, I like settings that are historical. And I like settings that are unlike where I am. And I also, I mean I also like fantasy settings too, I guess. You know, like Narnia. Narnia was amazing. I used to wish that I could escape to Narnia. I don't know why because so many weird and awful things would happen there. But you know, it was just the escapist part.

[9:00] CA: And what about characters? Do you have any favorite fictional characters, either villains or protagonists?

IM: Gosh, here you are with the favourites again, Catherine.

CA: I want to know your favourites.

IM: Who are my favorites? Setting and character are connected. Like you can take the same person and drop them in four different places and have them grow up and they will be different depending on where they grew up, right?

CA: Like "The Boys from Brazil." The clones of Hitler. I don't know if you know that old movie with Gregory Peck.

IM: Which movie?

CA: It's with Laurence Olivier and Gregory Peck. It's called "The Boys from Brazil." And it's all these clones of Adolph Hitler that neo-Nazis have planted in different lives and they don't grow up to be – I mean they have his genes —

IM: Hitler. Like they're Hitler but they're better Hitler.

CA: It would be hard to be a worse.

IM: I'm going to have to check that movie out. I think that would be really interesting. But yeah,

like who a character is, often they're connected. And a lot of the time you find the story in observing how this character responds to and is affected by the setting. My favorite characters are characters who are smart and who are willing to put everything on the line for what they believe is right. But the thing is, I hate characters where, like, the narrator tells me that the character is smart but I figure out everything before the character does. Those characters are not smart actually. I hate that. I hate it when I feel smarter than the character and yet the narrator is telling me that this character is a genius. So my favorite characters are characters like, there's a series for adults called *Outlander*, and the woman in that series -- Sassenach is her husband's pet name for her -- she's a really great character. And also there's another character in that series, Lord John Gray, who is a great character because he's complex. He has many layers. I also really liked, like from the Harry Potter series, Snape was my favorite character. Snape and Dumbledore. You know, Dumbledore was my favorite because he's supposed to be your favorite. He's everybody's favorite, right? Because he's wise and caring and right? Like he's in charge but he doesn't wield that power hurtfully. He wields it with care and love and respect for everyone under his care. And I think that's why we all love Dumbledore so much, because he's an example of a powerful person who doesn't abuse their power. But Snape— and I didn't love him; it's just that I really wanted to know more about him, because he had so many layers. Characters who are harder to get to know, you know, characters who have more going on beneath the surface, those are the characters that I like the most.

[11:50] CA: Excellent. And do you have a favorite POV to write from?

IM: I don't. It depends on the story and what the story needs. Sometimes the story needs first person POV because it's a very emotionally resonant story, and it's a story that takes place in the now for the character, where the character's emotions are almost on their skin all the time. And so for me, that's a first person POV kind of story. And I think especially for spooky stories, sometimes first-person POV can be really great because the reader only knows what the character knows. But sometimes the best way to introduce tension is to let the reader know something that the character doesn't know, and for that you need third person. So it really just

depends on what you're trying to do with the story. Try it though. Try it different ways. Try it in different perspectives and try it from different points of view. Always, always experiment. You know, you can try as many things as you need to until you get to the one that feels right.

CA: Yeah. I think a lot of people don't know just how much gets thrown out and that doesn't mean that it's a failure or a waste. That's how you get to the end of the story.

IM: Yeah, absolutely. I feel like grades in creative classes should just go away and not be a thing. Right? Because they teach us that you make a thing and then you hand the thing in as it is, and it gets marked. And that is not how this works. How this works is you make a thing and you step back from it and you say, 'Is this thing doing what I intended it to do?' And if it's not, you try again. And you keep trying until it does the thing that you intended to do. And I feel like giving kids grades in classes like art and music and creative writing delivers the wrong message. I think a lot of people come to writing as a career with the idea that they're going to write something and then someone will publish it. And like that revision process that happens in the middle, there's no understanding that that process is 90% of the process. I think that's an idea that comes from the way school approaches teaching these things. I feel like school itself is a lie about life. [laughter] Because in school you're given a set of stuff to memorize or a set of stuff to learn, and then you're given a deadline by which you have to learn it, and then you have a test where you repeat the stuff that you've learned, and maybe you do a bit of analysis if it's an essay or something like that, and then it's done and you move on to the next thing. And life is not like that. You know, like life does not happen in tidy week-long bites. Life is much messier, and story and art especially. I would love to see a system overhaul. Rebel! Rebel kids! Rebel!

[14:50] CA: Now I'm going to ask you some general questions about your process. Do you find that you edit yourself while you draft? Or do you just let it flow and then revise after?

IM: Oh yes, I edit myself while I draft. Absolutely. Yes, for sure. I can't help it. I wish I didn't because I feel like then at least the drafting would be faster. But then when I don't do that, then the draft is such a mess that it's just overwhelming. And so yeah, I like to edit as I go. Not too much. And I mean, sometimes editing is just like putting a comment in the margins. But I have to do something. I can't have a thought and not put it down. But then once I've put the

comments in the margins, then I can move on and I can keep going and I can know, Okay, I'm going to go back and fix that.

[15:35] CA: And what about monsters? Have you ever written a monster?

IM: Yes. I mean, it was a person. I think the worst monsters are people.

CA: That is on the list of questions. What's scarier: humans are monsters?

IM: Humans. Humans for sure. Because monsters are fake. We all know deep in our hearts that monsters aren't actually real. But people are real. And people do bad things, real bad things. So I find people much scarier than monsters. Monsters go away when the sun comes up. People don't.

[16:10] CA: All right. Did you tell stories around a campfire as a kid or have an off-the-cuff storytelling time?

IM: No. Campfires were not part of my childhood. I wish they were but they weren't, just because of our circumstances. So no, I never got to do that. One year when I was seven, my parents sent me on one of those like overnight go-away-for-a-week summer camps. And I hated it so much. I was not an outdoorsy kid, so the idea of spending a whole week in the woods in a cabin with bugs —

CA: And strangers.

IM: — and strangers, yes! A bunch of kids who I did not know and who were not my friends. It was like, what are you thinking? I thought they were insane. I just could not understand this decision-making at all. I think really they just needed a week off. But yeah. And so, I think there was probably some campfire storytelling but it was probably done by the camp counselors. And I don't remember it.

CA: So you did not send your kids away to camp?

IM: No. We pitched tents in our backyard we did backyard camping. Because my husband isn't much of a camper either; he's more of a glamer. So yeah, so we pitched tents in the backyard and the kids and I would sleep out there.

CA: And did you tell scary stories?

IM: Yeah. So as a grown up, as a grown up I've told my kids scary stories around the campfire.

[17:35] CA: Do you have a favorite scary story or scary movie?

IM: Oh my gosh, yes. So the story that absolutely -- to this day I get chills thinking about it -- is, I think it's, I want to say "The green ribbon." It's a story about a girl who has this green ribbon around her neck and she never takes it off. And then one day she does take it off. And I won't spoil the story but you need to -- listeners, you need to check that story out. And my favorite -- I can't do scary movies. I don't know. Something happened to me when I had kids. It was like my hormones flipped over and all of a sudden, scary movies were just not my cup of tea. But before I had kids, they were. And my favorite scary movie was "The Candyman."

CA: Okay, that was a scary one. I don't think I watched it because I think it might have been too scary for me.

IM: Yeah, well it's definitely a teens and up movie, for sure. Yeah. Quite scary. A recent horror movie that, again, I tried to watch it because I'd heard so many good things, and then I just -- because I can't stomach horror anymore -- I couldn't watch it, but "Get Out"

CA: Oh, I loved "Get Out."

IM: Yeah. Yes. Like again, I loved the social analysis that he was doing in that movie. But yeah, eventually it reached a point where the horror was just, I had to leave the room. Horror -- I can't handle it. I can't handle it, Catherine.

CA: It's okay, Ishta. You just stay away from it. [laughter]

[19:05] CA: All right. Do you have any phobias?

IM: No. I have some low-level anxieties. And they're all to do with, like, architecture and, like, structural anxieties. I made up that term. I don't know if it means anything, but I made it up. But it accurately describes what I have. So for example, like in the kitchen, the cupboards that are on the wall, I just worry that the nails and screws holding them up are not quite up to the task. And so, it's only lightweight stuff that goes in those cupboards. All the heavy stuff like dishes are in the cupboards that are resting on the floor, the cupboards beneath the counter. But yeah, heavy stuff? Like, you know how like sometimes you'll go to like a friend's house and

you'll be cooking in the kitchen, and you'll open the kitchen cupboard and it'll just be like packed with like full bags of flour and full bags of – yeah, I can't handle it. I can't handle it, Catherine. I just feel like — yeah, seeing something that juts out from the wall and is that loaded down just makes me, ugh, it makes me sweat.

CA: Interesting. I would call that a phobia. Yeah.

IM: And like the really tall buildings that sway in the wind? No thanks. I can't. I can't be in those buildings. I don't like it. I'm not afraid of heights. It's just that I distrust, yeah I have a distrust of the strength of those rivets and that they're really up to the task.

[20:35] CA: And do you have any collections? Do you collect anything?

IM: Yes, everything. So – and this started when I was little – I collect rocks. So like, a rock from each special place, right? So the rock can have some kind of meaning for me. And I try to make each new rock that I bring home different from the ones that I already have. And I have a collection of key chains. So every time I go somewhere new, I try to buy a keychain from that place. And books.

CA: So there's memories attached to them.

IM: Yes exactly. Yeah, for sure. They have personal significance to me, yeah. There are other things that I'd like to collect, you know, that I aspire to collecting. Like I would love to have an old maps collection, of like actual legitimately antique maps. You know, not like scanned printed facsimiles of maps but like the actual paper. I like old things.

CA: Maps are super cool.

IM: Yeah they are. But they're also, you know, those ancient maps are also super expensive. So I don't collect them yet. When I write the next Twilight, I will.

CA: Then you can start your map collection.

IM: That's right.

CA: All right. Well you've been great. Thank you for spending so much time with me. It's really nice to talk to you.

IM: Oh, it was good to talk to you too. Thank you for inviting me. This was lovely.

CA: All right, Ishta. I'm going to say goodbye. Thanks again.

IM: Okay. Thank you. Bye.

[music]

[22:05] Ishta Mercurio 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]

IM: My name is Ishta Mercurio. And I write books for kids, mostly picture books but also chapter books. And I have worked on a couple of young adult novels, although they both live in a drawer right now, while I sit on them and let them percolate and think about how I can make them better. I have done all kinds of different things throughout my life. I've been a barista; I've worked with autistic kids; I've gone door-to-door for an environmental action group; I have been an actor. And I learned that that's okay. Doing one thing with someone's life isn't always the right thing for that person, and I've learned that I'm one of those people for whom doing the one thing isn't necessarily the right thing. And so, yeah, so I embrace this wacky creative life of doing all kinds of different things, and writing all kinds of different things for all kinds of different people. And the one thing that is constant is that the characters that I write are characters who live outside the box and tend to live outside the norm and push the boundaries of what's expected of people who look like them or sound like them. And so I try to write stories about kids who do things unexpected.

[music]

[23:50] Find out more about Ishta Mercurio

You can hear more creative writing advice from Ishta Mercurio on Cabin Tales Episode 3.5: "Author Interviews about Inspiration"; on Episode 4.5: "Author Interviews about Plotting"; on Episode 7.5: "Author Interviews about Endings" and on 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

stories, excerpts and interview snippets you won't hear on the leftovers.

You can find out more about Ishta Mercurio and her books from her website at IshtaMercurio.com. There you'll find exemplary Teachers' Guides for both of her books. And you'll find Ishta's blog, where she shares advice, activities, and a collection of her favourite book covers. Like most guest authors on Cabin Tales, Ishta does virtual school and library visits, so use the links on her website to get in touch and invite her into your school to learn more about Ishta Mercurio and her books.

[music]

[24:55] 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 the novelist Raquel Rivera, who joins us from Montreal. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]