

Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 15: Kari-Lynn Winters – 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 Kari-Lynn Winters. She's the author of over 27 books for the very young, both fiction and non-picture books, including several series. She's also an academic, a professor who teaches teachers on language arts and drama. Kari-Lynn joins me from St Catharines, Ontario – but not in real time. I interviewed her by Zoom on September 3rd, 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 Kari-Lynn shares her love of unreliable narrators, her balance of many writing projects at once, and her fear of dogs, horses and ghosts. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:10] Interview with Kari-Lynn Winters

CA: You said that going around and looking at things and asking "what if?" and combining things is a good idea for young writers. Do you have any other suggestions for young writers on how to get or organize or combine ideas?

KLW: Oh, organize. Oh gosh. Don't do it! Don't do it! Don't organize. Everybody wants the exact kind of format and the way to organize. And basically, once you know the plot points of a story, I feel like you can play with that a little bit, and it doesn't have to be as organized. So like my book *On My Walk*, for example. If you look at it, it's a simple plot, right? There's two characters; they have a goal to go on a walk; it starts to rain; they run home. So, it's a very simple plot. But what makes that book really exciting is the rhythm of it. *On my walk, my springtime walk, I hear a horse, clippity clop, clippity clop.* So for example, you can take the storyline and and it's still there but you can make it really exciting and fun.

CA: So don't try to be too organized. Stay playful.

KLW: Stay playful.

CA: Great advice.

[2:30] CA: And do you have a favorite plot twist, either from your own work or from other books that you like?

KLW: Ooh, I love plot twists. I love it when the audience goes, “I didn't expect that!”

Unfortunately I can't tell you about them because that would spoil it if they do come out. But I just love them. Even if you think way back to *The Monster at the End of this Book*—

CA:--with Grover—

KLW: It's so fun. And then at the end you're like, “Oh, I'm the monster. Yay.” I love that. That's a great book to model after. Kids love that book.

[3:00] CA: *Do you have any favorite techniques for building tension?*

KLW: I know that this is something I'd really love to learn more about. But I do know that not telling the story, like if you look at a sunset and you don't describe the sun per se but you describe what's happening around you and the glow and things that are happening because of the sunset, I think that is one of the best ways to build tension. Not focusing on the thing that's scary but focusing on the responses people are having. That kind of makes you question, what's going on, what's happening. I think also the other thing is -- a lot of kids do this. They want to tell a really scary story. You know, instead of slowing it down they'll kind of speed it up at the moment that's the most scary. But that actually doesn't make you feel, it doesn't invoke the fear as a reader. So I think what's really important is to slow those moments down and really focus. It's like seeing it in slow motion, when it's the scariest part.

CA: *Anticipation.*

KLW: Anticipation, yeah. Yeah, that reminds me, like you know, sometimes things happen off scene that you don't get to see. You just hear them or you see people reacting. That's what makes it scary or builds tension or whatever.

[4:25] CA: *Nice. And do you have a favorite first line from your own books?*

KLW: I do. I want to thank Rob Saunders for this one, from *Bad Pirate*. He helped me come up with this one: *Barnacle Garrick was bad natured and horrible, which most pirates would say was good, very good. Augusta Garrick was good natured and kind, which most pirates would say was bad, very bad.* So that's one. And then I also love, I've always loved this line: *Jeffrey stared at the blank page. It glared back.* I don't know why. I like the “scared” and “glared.” I like how it

rhymes but you don't really pick up on the rhyme. And I just think it says a lot about having writers' block. So yeah.

[5:10] CA: *Those are great. All right. And have you ever opened with a piece of dialogue?*

KLW: Yeah. I mean with that poem I was telling you about, "Rhyme or Reasoning," it starts with the teacher talking: Write a poem that makes a rhyme / Take it slow, take your time." So yeah, I like to start with dialogue, although when I write picture books, a lot of time you're writing a picture book for a child that can't read sometimes. So sometimes you have to set up the setting of it. You have to kind of establish the place and the character because sometimes they won't know who it is. So for example, in my book *French Toast*, she's actually with her grandmother. But if a child is seen in a picture book with someone who's older, then often people assume it's their mother. So it kind of lets you know it's not her mother: *Even though Nanma is blind, she sees things others do not*. Sometimes you need to just kind of establish character before you can go into the dialogue.

[6:10] CA: *Sure. And do you have advice for young writers on how to begin a story? It's like you said that telling stories came easily for you, but writing it down did not.*

KLW: Yeah. So, one thing that I was taught a long time ago was that if you can't think of anything write about, write about having nothing to write about. At least you have a starting point. *I can't think of anything to write about*. Or you might also think about finding different things and just putting them together and meshing them together and just asking the question "What if? What if this happened?" That often spurs inspiration for me. You could also riff off a story that you really love and take that story further.

[6:55] CA: *And what about endings? Do you have any advice to young writers on endings?*

KLW: The ending needs to connect to the beginning. Often it's about the goal that the character has. A good example of not getting what you want but getting what you need is my book *No Matter what Friend*. He wants his dog to be lively and young and play with him and just be like the pup that he used to be. And at first he gets kind of frustrated because the dog is just kind of

sleeping and, you know, he's like, "Oh this dog. This dog's not doing what I want him to do." And at the end he realizes the dog's really trying to stand up and really trying to play, and he realizes I'm not going to get my dog to be younger but what I can do is I can adjust and I can let my friends go off and I can just be with my dog. So it gives both characters what they need but it's not necessarily what everybody wants.

[7:50] CA: Right. Do you have a favorite fictional setting either from your own work or a book that you love?

oh I love, I love the setting of *Best Pirate*. Oh, it reminds me of Saint Lucia, with the blue water. This is one of the books I wrote, that inspired it. And it also goes into the rainforest like there, and so you get these dark greens and then you have the blues of the water. Oh, I love it. Love, love, love that setting. Obviously I love my books, the On My series. Christina Leist put the books in Vancouver, which is one of my favorite cities. Vancouver, Grouse Mountain, like all those areas. Beautiful. I love those. Yeah. I think there's a book called *Imagine a Place* and there's some beautiful places in that.

CA: Okay, yes, a picture book.

KLW: Yeah. I also love the settings that Chris Van Allsburg creates. Just, they're so detailed and beautiful. Lots of different kinds of settings.

[8:50] CA: And do you have favorite fictional characters, either from your own books or from other books that you like?

KLW: I do. So from my own books, I love Barnacle Garrick. I even love the name Barnacle Garrick. And he's just so grumpy and he's so soft on the inside. I love my character Sloth. I absolutely love him. He's such a demanding little brat but I like him. I like my character Phoebe; she's just sweet. I like all my characters. I love Miss Sally from *Gift Days*. But there's other books that I love the characters too. I love like Wimpy Kid -- oh he's great. I love Pigeon. Oh man, I love Pigeon. Pigeon's so demanding and screaming all the time. He wants this, and wants that, and so kid-like. I like that. I love Scaredy Squirrel. I love the fact that you have a character that's all based on fear and anxiety. I love that. I love Mem Fox Tough Boris. Again, tough tough,

tough, but in the end all pirates cry. So I love that. I love characters that are really dynamic. They have a lot of different sides to them. You typically see one side of them, but then they come across and it's oh. So like Scaredy Squirrel ends up being brave at some point, and Wimpy Kid ends up being strong at some point, and Pigeon is less demanding, and Tough Boris is vulnerable. So, I think that's some of the characters I really love.

[10:15] CA: Nice. And do you have any exercises that you would recommend to young writers for either developing a setting or a character?

KLW: Yeah. Why not try drawing it or creating it with some sort of plasticine or something? Use what you have. Markers, pens, plasticine, or even just photographs. Go and take pictures to get some settings. And draw your characters. You might come up with a really interesting unique character or a beautiful setting.

[10:45] CA: Do you work on one project at a time?

KLW: Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. I would be 90 years old by the time I got two books published if I did that. No. I'm always working on several projects at once. Like right now, I'm working on the *Hungry for Arts* book, which is part of the *Hungry for Science* and *Hungry for Math* series. So I'm finishing the edits of *Hungry for Arts*, starting the words for *Hungry for Engineering*. I'm working on "The Masterpiece," which is almost ready to go. I have one that's coming out with Kids Can Press -- it's about a donkey who thinks he's a cat. So I'm editing that one and editing one that's coming out with Tradewind Books which is called "Just be Me." I'm working also on a couple of books with Scott Ritchie -- he's an illustrator. We're working on a "Monster can't go to sleep" book and a book about hockey. Yeah. There's lots of ideas that I'm slowly working on.

CA: And some of them are at different stages.

KLW: Absolutely. That's the key, you know, putting them all at different stages. And I dip in when I have time or when something strikes my fancy. But I also have a job, so I have to prioritize that. It's worked out for me. I mean, I've won like a lot of awards and I'm very grateful. I have 27 books that have been published. So, obviously the process works for me. But it's not a quick process. But you know, that's not the reason I write anyway. The reason I write

is so that I can be with kids. Because I used to be a teacher. I used to work with kids all the time. But now I teach adults. So this is a way for me to hang out with kids and have a great time and teach some literacy skills and do some drama. Yeah.

[12:35] CA: That's great. Sometimes when I do school visits I do object studies, and so I asked if your stories, any of your stories include memorable objects?

KLW: None do so far, but I have a manuscript that I'm working on called "The Masterpiece" and an important object in "The Masterpiece" is the pen that she uses.

CA: And was that sparked by a real pen? Do you love pens?

KLW: Yes, I love pens. My boyfriend one time gave me this really nice Swarovski pen. Oh, it was the best gift. I love that pen.

[13:10] CA: All right. And what do you think is the hardest thing about writing a story?

KLW: Honestly, it's kind of the easiest and the hardest thing together, and that is working on your ideas. I find that it's sometimes easy to brainstorm an idea but what's hard is when you brainstorm an idea and you think it's amazing, and then you go to do some research on it and you go, "Oh, there's 20 books on this topic and the story's already been told; how do I make this story unique?" So that can be kind of frustrating.

CA: So telling a story in a new way.

KLW: Yes, that's it. You know, you've got to figure out how can I do this story in a way that nobody's done and I can add my own personal expertise and spin on it. Yeah, that's I think one of the hardest. Sometimes though, sometimes finding the ending is the hardest part. Sometimes it's like, okay, where do I end this story? Do I end it here? I could end it here? I've had stories that have had like two or three endings. My story *Gift Days*, it's the story of this girl who wants to be a teacher, who wants to learn how to read. So do I end the story where she's teaching her siblings and she learns how to read? Or do I end the story with her being a teacher of teachers later on life? Where do I end the story? So in that one I chose to give it two endings.

[14:30] CA: And do you have a favorite POV to write from?

KLW: I love writing from second POV, like being bossy to the readers and stuff. But for some reason that rarely kind of gets published. I think it's really off-putting and I think people don't really get it sometimes. They're like, what's going on? But I love those books. You know, like *The Monster at the End of the Book* where it is telling the reader, "Don't do this, you can't do this." But those are hard to write. But when they're done well, they're done so well, it's just like, Oh, I love this book.

[15:10] CA: *And have you ever made a book about monsters?*

KLW: I'm working on a book about monsters right now as we speak, called *Can't Sleep*. It's interesting. I went down to Saint Lucia for the Rainforest of Reading. They're really like sensitive about monsters in their culture. It made me have a different perspective for sure, to think, not everybody's going to be allowed or feel free to enjoy this book. Just cultural differences. So that is an interesting point of view. I started thinking about that and I actually put *Can't Sleep* on hold for a long time. But then I realized, yeah, it's a good story and it needs to be told like the way that I'm telling it. The story that I'm writing is really just about mindfulness and how fears can kind of take you into your imagination and, really there might not be something to be afraid of. So how do we keep our self in check, right? And what kind of strategies can you use when we do feel fear? So that's why I wrote it, because I still think it's beneficial. But it is interesting to think that different cultures all over the world may not like monsters and may not agree with the philosophy of monsters so.

[16:20] CA: *Very interesting. And did you tell stories around a campfire as a kid?*

KLW: Of course. I can't remember them though. I'm sure they were terrible.

CA: *But you enjoyed that, you had that story telling off the cuff --*

KLW: Oh goodness, I told stories everywhere. On the playground. Like I was the kid that was always telling stories. So the campfire wasn't going to stop me. That was a place to like shine I'm sure there were terrible though.

CA: *They were probably awesome.*

[16:45] CA: Do you have a favorite scary story?

KLW: I just really like the way Joel Sutherland tells scary stories because I love the fact that it's nonfiction. Like he actually tells a story that you think could be fiction but it's actually nonfiction.

CA: He does the Haunted Canada, right?

KLW: Yeah. I find that way of telling stories very interesting.

CA: Nice. And you get too scared for scary movies, right?

KLW: The only reason why I watched those movies when I was like teenager is because I felt the peer pressure. I felt like everybody else was doing it and if I didn't do it, I would be a wimp. So I'd just do it because everybody else did it. But now that I'm older, I don't care what my friends think. Although I love, I do love characters that are monster-like, like people that are monster-like. Thinking about the story Matilda. You know, the film Matilda. And there's the principal, and she's horrible. She's horrible. She's just mean mean principal. And that's kind of monster-like. I love characters like that. I love characters that you just can't believe they would behave like that. But I don't know if it's really like scary per se.

CA: Right. A good villain.

KLW: I also love characters that you kind of are unsure of and don't really know what's happening with them. Like Snape in *Harry Potter*. I love that character so much. You're always kind of wondering, is he a good guy, is he a bad guy, I don't trust that character. I like unreliable narrators too.

CA: So do I. When they're done well—

KLW: Yeah, it's like oh yeah. It feels like a plot twist but it's actually just a character. Yeah. I'd like to do more work on that.

[18:30] CA: All right. And do you have any phobias?

KLW: I don't like guard dogs. Like I'm really afraid of like big dogs that guard places and that could bite me. Yeah, I think that's because I used to live in the country and we used to go bike riding and dogs would chase us. Yeah. Like I have a phobia of animals that can be aggressive but we don't anticipate that. I get kind of scared when I'm beside horses for some reason.

CA: *I do too. And once I was at the petting zoo and there was a man holding his little toddler, and there was a big horse, and the little boy said, "Do they bite?" And I said, "Oh no, they don't bite." Like what do I know about horses? And it did. It bit this poor little child.*

KLW: Oh my god.

CA: *So yeah, horses can bite.*

KLW: They can bite, they can kick, they're huge, like they are in control. Actually I was watching a parade one time and the horse, like something spooked the horse, and the horse took off. like into the crowd. Everybody was like grabbing their kids and getting out of the way. And this horse, they could not get it under control. It was like, Oh yeah. So I have a fear of things like that. I also don't like if there's a bat and it gets too close to your head. I don't like that either. I guess animals. I don't think I could be a vet.

[19:50] CA: *Do you collect anything?*

KLW: I collect illustrations from famous illustrators. I have a collection of illustrations that I frame and I put them all around my room. My room is just covered with my friends' illustrations.

CA: *That's a good collection.*

[20:05] CA: *And what do you think is scarier: humans or monsters?*

KLW: They can be the same thing. There's lots of really scary humans. I think monsters are pretty predictable, but I think that humans are unpredictable. Not that I'm afraid of humans. I actually have very little fear of humans. I'd probably be afraid of a monster if I actually saw one. In real life, I think humans are a little more scary because they are unpredictable, you don't know what's going to happen. What do you think?

CA: *I think humans, but that's only because I've never met a monster, you know, where we've all heard of or possibly encountered monstrous humans. But I think that the universe, that reality is far more powerful than we in our daily lives think about it and far more indifferent to us, and I don't know.*

KLW: If you have asked the question, "What's more scary: spirits or humans?" I would say 100%

spirits. Because I have encountered ghosts before. So that scares me more than humans. But monsters? I don't know. I've never seen a monster, so.

CA: Interesting. We can talk another day about your spirits.

KLW Yes.

[21:20] CA: This is fabulous, Kari-Lynn. Thank you so much for doing this. I have so many good snippets.

KLW: Anything you need, you use.

CA: So thank you again. You've been fabulous and it's really nice to see you.

KLW: Okay. Talk to you later.

CA: Bye.

KLW: Bye.

[music]

[21:40] Kari-Lynn Winters 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]

KLW: Hi. I'm Dr. Kari-Lynn Winters. And I'm a children's author, a playwright, and a performer. I'm also a scholar. I've been working at Brock University as an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education. And I have authored over 27 books. I really am interested in arts education, children's literature, and embodied literacies. And I live here in St Catharines, Ontario, with my two awesome kids and my three incredible cats. So that's me, Kari-Lynn Winters.

[music]

[22:25] Find out more about Kari-Lynn Winters

You can hear more creative writing advice from Kari-Lynn Winters on Cabin Tales Episode 3, "Spooky Stories are all Around Us," about getting ideas; on Episode 4.5, "Author Interviews about Plotting"; 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 great Canadian authors' advice on creative writing.

You can learn a whole lot more about Kari-Lynn Winters from her website at KariWinters.com. There you'll find information about her many books and magazine publications, plus resources for teachers and kids, and a list of writing workshops. Like most guest authors on Cabin Tales, Kari does virtual school and library visits. So visit the contact page on her website to get in touch and invite her into your class to learn more about Kari-Lynn Winters and her books.

[music]

[23:20] 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 Cary Fagan, the multiple-award-winning author of picture books, middle-grade novels, and novels for adults. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]