Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 20: Don Cummer – 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 Don Cummer. He's the author of historical fiction for young readers, including *Brothers at War, A Hanging Offence,* and *Blood Oath*. Those are three novels in Don's "Jake and Eli" series published by Scholastic, historical novels about two boys whose friendship is tested by the War of 1812. Don divides his time between Canada and Ireland, and for this interview, he joined me from Dublin – but not in real time. I interviewed him by Zoom in September 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 Don shares his love of historical and fictional character twists, his thoughts on the importance of putting a character in jeopardy, and his collection of beautifully polished first chapters for books he hasn't finished. I have such a collection myself. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.
[crickets]

[1:20] Interview with Don Cummer

DC: One of the questions you ask is whether I plan things beforehand.
CA: Yes.
DC: Do I plan things beforehand? History plans it for me. I'm a historical novelist. So the big arc -- we know who wins ,we know who loses, we know is executed for treason, we know who goes on to become King of England or whatever. We know what the history is. But everything else, what happens with my characters, is undetermined, and they keep on wandering off all over the place. In order to get them to the final line where history says they have to be, I have to steer them on all kinds of different directions that they don't want to go. Sometimes with characters you just have to let them go their own way.
CA: Okay, so that part you don't necessarily plan out.
DC: No. You know a lot of people do. Some friends of mine, a friend named Gare Joyce who writes a mystery novels, detective novels -- his book is outline is almost as long as the final book. There is a guy who has to plan everything. Now I have to plan everything in terms of what I need to know in terms of what happened in the history and all the little details, and sometimes that gives impetus to the story, but sometimes I've got to just make sure that it's in the background and you don't let it take over. It tells you where your finish line is and it tells you where the race course is, but it doesn't tell you how to run that race.
CA: Very nice. And so like that process of discovery.
DC: Yeah, it's a lot of fun.

[2:40] DC: The essence of storytelling is conflict. I sometimes talk about this in classrooms. We're all familiar with conflict. And I usually talk about how, Okay, who's got a younger brother or younger sister? Who has a younger brother or younger sister you get into fights with them about who gets to control the remote for the television? All the hands go up. So that's a conflict, isn't it? Yeah. Who's going to be able to choose the next show? Is it an important conflict? No.

But it happens all the time. You know what that conflict feels like. What would happen if – and that's my favorite expression, what would happen if – you happen to know that some terrorist has wired that remote so the next time the channel is changed, the parliament buildings are going to blow up? Big conflict now. Yes. So there's always that opportunity to just use your imagination and just say, Okay, how can this be made worse? How can you raise the, what they call the jeopardy? And that's a great thing to look at if you want to add some juice to your story.

[3:40] CA: One of my questions is how do you feel about tormenting your character.
DC: Sometimes you just want to say, ah, wouldn't it be nice if they all can settle down and live happily ever after, mom and dad could tuck them into bed, and the war would be over and they could go on and be off to school the next morning. But you know, that's not my job.

[4:00] CA: Excellent. How do you feel about sad endings? Like if you have tormented them and then—
DC: Yeah. You know, I don't like sad endings myself. I like happy endings, or at least endings where you feel there's a sense of redemption and feel that you've earned something. And it may not necessarily be happy but at least something is proven and you go on a stronger person. And so in my books, each of the books ends with a parting. You've got these two best friends who are standing up for each other in the middle of war. And it's the middle of us of a civil war. Their community is torn apart. And they're standing up for each other. And with each book, they're torn apart at the end. They have to go their own separate ways. And it gets more and more severe each time. So that's sad. But you know, so the question is: how is it going to be resolved so that the war is finally going to be over? Are these boys going to be on the same side or are they going to be on opposite sides? Will they be able to maintain their friendship after three years of war? And you'll have to read the books to figure that out.

[5:00] CA: Great. That brings up another question because you have written a series. How do you manage endings in a story that isn't finished? How can you end a story satisfactorily knowing that it's going to continue? Do you have any tips?
DC: Well, if I was better at that, then everybody would know how the books would end because, you know, the original plan was to end it in three. And by the time we got to three books, the boys are not where they need to be to be at the ending. But this is one of the challenges. These kids took off on their own. And I'm glad they did, even though it creates problems that we can't finish the story in the three books originally planned. So we'll just keep on working at it.

[5:35] CA: Do you have a favorite plot twist from your own work or other books? Like somewhere where the plot went in a direction that you really weren't expecting that you really admired as a writer and reader?
DC: One of my big things about studying history and writing about history is that it's hard to really tell who the good guys are and the bad guys are at times. If you're living in the moment, the people who are the good guys may turn out to be monsters when you find out what they're really up to and what they're really doing. Or they become monsters in response to events. So, my favorite twist is to take people who the reader might initially really like at first and in the end you find, Oh my God, this person is really a terrible person. And vice versa, somebody who you think is a bully and a real villain turns out to be a hero. That kind of plot twist I'd love to do. It's not something you turn around on a dime. It's something that you have to build up slowly,

slowly, slowly, and then there's a reveal that's on the other side. I do that several times. And I see that a lot in other books as well. I love books where they take the stories of people who are considered on the wrong side and you take a look at them from their point. There's a wonderful book about, it takes Beowulf, it takes the Beowulf story and tells it from the point of view of the monster.
CA: Is that Grendel by John Gardner?
DC: Grendel. Yeah, that's right, that's right. And there's all kinds of people who do that with historical characters and just turn them around. You know, before I did Jake and Eli, the Jake and Eli stories about the War of 1812, I did some writing on people in Canadian history who are considered on the wrong side and told their stories. It's always an eye opener to really see things from the other side and understand the subtleties. Now, Jake and Eli are about, the central spine of the story is about a man named Joe Wilcox. Nobody remembers Joe Wilcox anymore. But back in 1812, 1814, parents used to send their children to bed saying, You go to bed or Joe Wilcox will get you if you don't watch out. He was the boogie man. He is one of the great traitors in history, and he's in Canadian history. But we've forgotten him. We've erased him from our memory, from our national memory. So you take a look at what history looks like from Joe Wilcox's perspective, and you set two 12-year-old boys into that world and see what happens. At the beginning, they really admire Joe Wilcox, Mr Wilcox. And then they see what he changes, you know, what is his changing politics going to do to them. And that's basically the narrative spine, the historical narrative spine of the books.

[8:05] CA: Great. Have you ever opened a story with dialogue, like opening right in the middle of a conversation?
DC: I don't see anything particularly wrong with that. I don't tend to do it because I think that it's much easier to set a nuanced opening where you can set a scene. I like my dialogue to be short and choppy. And you can move action, you can move a scene along quickly. But it's so much more efficient to set a scene without trying to keep that voice of the characters in dialogue.

[8:40] CA: All right. And you said that you do a lot of revising. When you're drafting, do you revise while you draft? Or do you just try to get the story out?
DC: In my better self, I would say just get it out. But I've got too strong an editor in the back of my head. So sometimes it's hard for me to get out of the early chapters. And this is probably a warning, too, to younger writers, that if you invest so much time revising and revising and revising those first chapters, you might find out later that it's not going to work. So sometimes it's best just to push on. Now, I wish I could take that advice myself.
CA: Me too.
DC: Because I'm always editing myself. I've got beautiful opening chapters of books that will never be published. Those opening chapters have been polished and polished and polished and they sing. But in the end I gave up because the story wasn't getting to where it needed to go. So if I had spent a lot of that time getting to the end of the story, (a) I would have either have found out that, you know, maybe I needed a different kind of opening; or (b) I would have found that maybe I don't have the interest to carry the story on to completion. That's another thing. I don't know how you feel about this, Catherine. I've got a lot of projects that are abandoned.
CA: Oh, me too.
DC: Sometimes a writer has to say, you know, I just don't have the interest in this story to keep pushing it. It takes a lot of work and a lot of time to get something through to completion. And

you've got to really love the story that you're doing. The Jake and Eli story, actually when I first conceived the idea of telling the Joe Wilcox history from the point of view of two boys – one's Canadian and one's American – it inflamed my imagination for years. Those early months, that's all I could think about. And I knew I was going to be around to do this for the long haul. So, you know, the first questions an editor or a publisher would say is, He says this is going to take several books to tell the story; is he going to be around for the long haul? Because, you know, publishers and editors are taking a big risk when they're dealing with a first-time writer.

If young writers are taking a look at a publishing career and they're thinking of doing things as the series, I would caution them to think that through. I would say it's probably a lot easier to get the attention of a publisher by something short, easy to produce, and doesn't commit them for years of continuing stories in a series. You know, there's a business side of writing. We shouldn't be driven by the business side of it – that's the job of somebody else – but we have to be aware of it. And part of the business side of writing is knowing that it costs money to produce a book. And it costs more money to produce a long book than it does to produce a short book. And it costs a lot more money to produce a series than it does to produce one book. So if you're looking at it from the publisher's point of view, you've got to say, Okay, how am I going to make it easy for them? And maybe if they really like my first short novel, they'll listen to me when I tell them that I'm going to write War and Peace or that I'm going to write The Chronicles of Narnia.

CA: Yeah. You're all about taking other perspectives. Through history, through –

DC: Yeah.

[11:40] CA: That's great. Do you have a favorite point of view to write from?

DC: I love writing in first person, but I think that first person's sort of a way to make sure that I don't get carried away by exposition in history. One of the big problems in writing historical fiction is how do you explain the historical context? How do you present the exposition? And if you're writing in first person, that forces you not to tell too much. You've got to deliver the historical background and the social context in a way that doesn't seem intrusive. So I find that useful. In the Jake and Eli books, the first two are written in first person from one character's point of view. The third one is in first person as well, but from the point of view of two characters alternating. And then the fourth one – I'm really having fun with this – it's in third person. I'm finding that a challenge. But it's a lot easier to control the developments when you're in third person. One of the reasons why my plots tended to veer off and these characters take over, you make choices, your characters make a choice, they make a decision, and it's going to have an impact on everything from that point forward. And it's easier to control that if you're writing in third person. It seems strange, but I find that when I'm writing in first person, that character is as alive as I am, and just as ornery and just as capable of making bad choices.

CA: And was that a conscious choice to switch to third person or did you experiment with that?

DC: Yeah, it was a conscious choice. I thought, you know, I need to wrestle the timeline back. Writing in first person just got me carried away into other directions. My second book veered into the spooky. These boys have to deal with death and tragedy, and it introduces elements of the supernatural. And I didn't expect it to get into supernatural.

[13:30] CA: Very cool. So do you have any advice on making a spooky atmosphere for the reader?

DC: My advice for writing spooky atmospheres is not to hurry it. It comes with layering. At least for me it does. You just start introducing elements and elements and elements, and next thing you know it's very spooky. Let's say that there's a spooky atmosphere in your own world and you say, Oh my God that looks scary. There's no way I'm going into that haunted house. It just looks too spooky. But if it doesn't look spooky at the beginning, and it just starts getting weird bit by bit by bit, and next thing you know, you say, You know what? I'm not comfortable here anymore. I want to go – oops, I can't! The door has slammed or whatever it is. For campfires it's different. You know, if you're sitting around a campfire, start with the spooky stuff. But if you're writing a novel or story where it's otherwise a normal world and you're expecting a normal world, and you introduce the weird elements bit by bit, and all of a sudden your character realizes, Hey, I don't want to be here anymore. How can I get out? And that's when you have lots of fun. You know, once you get to that point and it's really spooky, then you start increasing the jeopardy.

[14:45] CA: Excellent. And do you have any favorite settings from fiction, either your own work or work that you admire? I mean, setting must be pretty important to you as a historical novelist.
DC: Yeah, setting is everything in historical novels. I'm going to do a shout-out to my friend Karen Bass. Some of the stuff that she does, both in historical fiction and in her contemporary fiction. She did something called *The Hill.* It's a story about a boy from the city who's been in a plane crash and he's with an indigenous friend and they have to escape. But the way that she sets that world in northern Alberta is just wonderful, and keeps cranking up the jeopardy. Let me talk about settings. One of the great things that I love about the way that I've been working with Jake and Eli is it's made me get to know, get reacquainted with the town of Niagara on the Lake in Ontario. And Niagara on the Lake is a beautiful town in its own right. 200 years ago it was one of the major cities in what was then upper Canada. Major cities – it was a town of 1000 people. My imagination for years has been living in this town, and the streets are still the same. The layout of the town is still the same. The fort it is still there the way it was. It's a reconstructed fort; there's one building that still remains. But none of the houses have survived from that period. Why? Because my characters burned them down. My story is trying to recreate that town as it was, and I can walk the streets of Niagara on the Lake and you can imagine it. You can walk those streets and you can picture what the tannery would've been like at the end of that road, and Dunwoody house at the corner, and here's the headquarters where General Brock, you know, has his office. And it's all there. It's all there because the streetscape is not that different than what it would have been 200 years ago.

Now, if I had set the scene in Toronto, the Battle of York, which is in the same period, Fort York is there but you walk across the area where the battle took place and it's highways and it's, you know, the Canadian National Exhibition grounds and stuff like that. It's a lot harder to get your imagination. But you know, you can go down to the end of King Street where it meets the Lake and you look across to Fort Niagara across the way, and at night and you hear the waves lapping, and you can hear voices, you know, from up in the tavern up the street, and you could be back there. You could be back in the setting for Jake and Eli. It's wonderful to be able to evoke that, but also to be able to go and step into it and live it again.

[17:15] CA: Nice. So you would probably recommend to young writers, if there is a setting similar to what they're writing, to actually go there and put themselves into their world.

DC: Yeah, well that's true. And you know, you can find equivalents. I mean, a graveyard is a graveyard, if you're doing your spooky story. Now, there's some graveyards that are really spooky if you want a spooky graveyard. You know, there's one in London called Highgate, and it's deconsecrated and really spooky. You know, the one at Niagara on the Lake. The graveyard in Niagara on the Lake actually was the battlefield. The American army built their trenches through the graveyard. Now, imagine that. And how about this? The battle of Lundy's Lane, which is the big climax of the Jake and Eli story, was fought in a graveyard at midnight. The Americans had to attack up the hill at midnight. The Canadians were defending the hill. And you know, when I started these stories, zombie stories were all the rage. So I thought, you know, why don't I just go with the flow? General Brock has been dead for a year and a half but he rises from the grave and he leads the zombie army in the graveyard at night, to push the American invaders back. You know, I hope somebody takes that idea sometime and runs with it because there is a zombie story waiting to be written about the War of 1812.

[18:30] CA: All right. And characters. Do you do character exercises? Like some people write in a diary as their character or interview their character or do character sketches. Do you ever do that sort of side work?
DC: No I don't. I admire people who do. It shows real discipline. I just want to get down to writing, to telling the story. You know, you have to be aware that it may take you in places that you weren't planning to go.
CA: And places you might get stuck.
DC: Yeah.

[19:00] CA: Are any of your stories based on your own childhood?
DC: You know, my main character is named Jacob, and my son is named Jacob. And people ask me, Is Jake in the story based upon my son? And absolutely not. My son is more like Eli, just out there, flamboyant, just fun-loving. Jacob is actually more like what I was like. You know, quiet, contemplative, willing to take risks but always thinking twice about what other people are going to think about him, trying to do the right thing all the time. So, it's easy to write yourself into characters, but it's a lot more fun, I have a lot more fun writing about Eli than about Jake. He's the sort of person that you'd want to have as a friend, a guy who is always out there and always enjoying life.

[19:45] CA: Nice. And have you ever turned your fears into fiction?
DC: Have I ever tried my fears into fiction? Well, when I started working on the second book and it started turning to the supernatural, it got into a lot of things that I'm probably subconsciously concerned about. You know, the idea that this world that we see, we're not seeing everything, and that there's something happening that we're not aware of. And maybe it comes out in our dreams or maybe, you know, whether it comes out as ghosts or supernatural or dreams, or fear that the people that we know may not be who we think they are. I mean, all this. I'm basically a happy, well-adjusted guy, but there's always that. I play in my psyche what would happen. What would happen if these people that you trust turned out to be monsters? A question that you've asked is which are scarier, people or monsters? And I think the really interesting thing is whether there's a difference. One of my favorite stories in literature – it's become a modern myth – is Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and that notion that within each of us, that calm civilized outward appearance, there is a monster.

[21:00] CA: All right. I guess a final question would be, do you have any recommendations to young writers for getting ideas for stories?
DC: Yeah I do: read. Read newspapers. There is all kinds of things you'll find out. There was a story the other day about -- you can't make this stuff up -- there's a kite flying festival in China, and a little girl is holding onto this giant kite and the kite takes off and it carries her. I'm just waiting for somebody to write a story about that. What must that be like? You're carried off by a giant kite. Every day in the newspaper there's at least one, often half a dozen, of these stories. Things you say, Oh, wouldn't that make a great story? This is one of the reasons I love reading newspapers and why it was such a hard thing to give up. Always stories like that. And also every time I read a history book I come across stuff that I say, oh man, somebody's got to turn that into a script or a novel. This is just too good.

There's one I read just the other morning, an Irish history. There was a rebellion in the 19th century. And so these Irish rebels are going to attack a police barracks. And there's three of them and there's seven policemen in the barracks. And meanwhile, you know, back up the road the Irish, the peasants are rising, they're gathering; there's a thousand of them. But these three guys realize, Okay, let's go and capture this police station. So they go in and they take the policeman by surprise. And the officer in charge of the police says, Oh you know fellows, lads, really we're on your side. We may be policemen but we're all for the Irish people. But you know, it'll really humiliate us if it was just the three of you who arrested, who captured the six of us. So I'll tell you what you do. Go back and get the thousand, or at least get 100, at least get a whole bunch of you. And come back and then we'll surrender and we can go out with our heads held high. And so the leader of the group, he's convinced by this smooth-talking constable, so he says, Okay, we'll go back and get a hundred guys. Of course, when they come back the policemen have all departed and they've taken all the arms and ammunition with them that they were hoping for. You know, that's just begging for a story. And anytime you open a history book, you're going to find things like. So how to find stories? Read.

[23:00] CA: Excellent. All right. Well, you've had so much good advice.
DC: This has been a lot of fun.
CA: Yeah it's been a lot of fun. It's been great to hear you talk. I kind of want to interview everyone I know now. You find out all sorts of stuff. So I wish you well with continuing the series.
DC: Thank you.
CA: See you Don. Thanks again. Have a good day.
DC: Bye Catherine.
[music]

[23:30] Don Cummer introduces himself

And in case you've forgotten who you're listening to, here's a last bit from the author in his own words.
[music]

DC: Hi. My name is Don Cummer. I'm from Calgary, Alberta, but I'm living between Ottawa, Ontario and Dublin, Ireland these days. I am the author of a series of books about three boys growing up in the War of 1812, the Jake and Eli stories. And I'm a historical novelist. I love history. And I'm really looking forward to Catherine's questions.

[music]

[24:00] Find out more about Don Cummer

You can hear more creative writing advice from Don Cummer on Cabin Tales Episode Five: "Squirm," 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 it's full of creative writing advice from writers across Canada.

You can find out more about Don Cummer and his books from his website at DonCummer.com. There you can find all sorts of information about Don, his books, his writing career, and his family. And you'll find lots of information on the War of 1812 and the inspiration for the Jake and Eli series. You can even watch a YouTube video of Don being arrested by some historical characters while launching the book *Brothers at War*. Like most guest authors on Cabin Tales, Don does virtual school and library visits, so follow the links on his contact page to get in touch and invite him into your school to learn more about Don Cummer and his books.
[music]

[25:10] 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 the young adult fantasy author Sarah Raughley, who joins us from Ottawa. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.
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