Cabin Tales 2021: Interview 22: David McArthur – 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 David McArthur. He's the author of four picture books in the "What Does…?" series, including his most recent, *What Does a Caterpillar Do?* illustrated by Lucy Rogers, for which all profits are being donated to the Victoria Child Abuse Prevention and Counselling Centre. David also writes stories for young adults. His writing career began with telling stories to his family. He's a graphic designer and creative writer who joins me from Victoria, BC. 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 David shares his preference for first person point of view, his love of fantastic takes on real-world settings, and his favourite scary story. Heard for the first time on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

[1:10] Interview with David McArthur

DM: All the books I've had published are from the same series, the picture book series. The other ones I've never had the confidence to actually try and get them published. Maybe one day I will.
CA: Well, most writers are familiar with the old crisis of confidence.
DM: That's kind of nice to know. It makes you feel a little bit better.

[1:30] CA: That's right. So I'm going to ask you about plotting. Do you tend to know the end of your story when you begin? Do you plan things out in advance?
DM: So I will try and plan. But actually, part of my biggest struggle is I get frustrated at the planning stage. I want to get my ideas onto paper. And so most of the time what I do is I will write – I have a rough idea as to where the plot is going; I tend to know the ending, but it tends to be three or four books away – so I'll write the ending first and then I'll come back and I'll figure out how I get my characters from A to Z. And then I will revisit it and I will edit it a lot. I seem to spend a lot of time in the editing phase and the reworking phase, more than even say the drafting phase. And I think that is because I'm not sitting down and having a full detailed plan mapped out. I'm having brainstorm boxes and things like that. I wish that I could actually sit down and have a detailed plan like JK Rowling did with *Harry Potter* and I'm sure JRR Tolkien did with *Lord of the Rings,* and have this huge plan that stretches across the walls. And I wish I

could do that. But my brain is wired to more of the just getting it onto paper and seeing where it goes and where ends up. And I think actually that allows you to be fairly free rein in the story because you can react to situations that are happening and ideas that you get, and you can weave them into the story as you go.

[2:50] CA: Yes. And sometimes when we write stories, we have to create problems for characters. And how do you feel about tormenting a character?
DM: [laughter] I mean, you don't enjoy it. Well, you kind of do. But only from a sense that you want to see how your characters handle the situation that they're in. You develop this person in your head and they're no longer just words on a piece of paper. There's a full-fledged person who's living inside your brain with you. And throwing an unexpected situation at them and seeing how they handle that, it's quite entertaining.

[3:25] CA: Good, nice. And do you have any advice that you would give to young writers who might be stuck in the middle of a story?
DM: Yes, I think so. A lot of the advice that I've been given personally has tended to be, Take some time, do something different, you know, revisit what you've written. And I've been in situations where it's helped. But I've also found myself that, when that advice is followed, I tend to forget the story that I was working on and get distracted by another project. So what I try and do when I'm stuck is actually not stop working on the story, but just write out some plot cards, put them into a little bag, and then just draw some out at random. Obviously it's linked to the story because that's what the plot cards are. But the challenge is to then try and weave what you've written out into the story. It may be that you end up with complete trash. But what it does do is it gets you thinking again, it gets your creativity firing, by doing something that's linked to the story but different to what you've written so far. And that in itself can really help me – and I'm hoping other people – to then proceed with the narrative that you've already written.

[4:30] CA: Okay, nice. And you mentioned opening with dialogue. Is that something that you have ever done?
DM: I was taught at a very young age that you don't open a book with dialogue. And whenever I sit down to start writing a book, I always have that little phrase in the back of my head. Whether it's right or wrong, that bit of advice has stayed with me. And I think as a result I have always tried to steer clear from opening a book with dialogue. Maybe one day I'll manage it. I don't know. So I tend to open stories with more of a description of the environment or the town or building or even an object rather than with dialogue.
CA: Okay, yeah. Most people I asked -- I think there was one that might have opened with dialogue -- but at the same time that most people are saying, No, don't open with dialogue, many many people have given as a favourite first line EB White's "Where's Papa going with that axe?" from Charlotte's Web.
DM: It does need to have a hook, doesn't it? It does need to have a hook. You can't really start with something like, "Can I have that piece of pie, please?"

[5:30] CA: All right. You have written a series, a connected series, yes? All right. So how do you handle endings in a story that you know will continue?
DM: With the "What does…?" series, they're all individual books. It's a very simple-ish book which is really designed to help kids learn to read. They're part of a series but they're very

standalone. With the other stories I've written, they are part of this longer story which comes together to form this collection of stories, I guess. I think you really need to end on a question. And that question can be, What happens next? How are they going to get out of this? That sort of thing. So you need to leave the reader wanting more. But not in an uncomfortable, well that wasn't very good, sort of finish. It needs to be gripping but at the same time it's got to have a little bit of a down time so you don't feel completely robbed at the end of the story. It certainly is a tricky thing to get right.
CA: I think it happens a lot when the publisher has contracted a series and they're marketing it as a series, so you know you're not getting a standalone book. And then it's more like a volume.
DM: Yeah. And you end up with just a long big book. And I have to say it's something that, again, JK Rowling did very well. And actually, Enid Blyton did with the Famous Five and Secret Seven and all the other books that she did, where each story is a standalone but you feature the same characters. You're aware that there's something bigger happening, but because each book has that story completed in that book's arc, you're not really thinking about what's happening above that. It's only when you've got all the books written and the final book comes out and concludes everything that you suddenly sit back and go, Oh. You've got to treat that differently to the whole sequence that you have, say, with *Lord of the Rings* where each book leads straight on to the next one. So I guess in a way, it kind of depends on the approach that you're taking in that respect as well.

[7:30] CA: Yes. And how do you feel about sad endings?
DM: It's one of the questions that I saw that you were going to ask. I confess I don't like sad endings. I know they work for some people. I tend to avoid sad endings as a final part of the book. If it's part of something where you can actually rectify the sad ending in the next story, that's okay. I don't mind that so much. But when you get to the end of the book and you know your reader's going to be in tears, you're in tears as you're writing it – yeah, that's not really my approach. I prefer leaving people feeling a little bit more uplifted and that humankind is not such race after all.

[8:05] CA: Do you have a favorite setting from fiction, either your own story or a book that you love?
DM: I like setting my stories in the real world, but a real world with a bit of a twist. So I tend to take an event or a setting -- so for example, a story I wrote when I was a student actually was set in the Second World War. But I took the idea based on this news article I had read which said that when the Americans were testing the atomic bomb, they were afraid it was actually going to crack the earth's crust and release [laughter] the citizens of hell into the world. I thought this is a fantastic premise for a book. What if that actually happened? So I try and take, say, real world events and change them to reality in the story and add that fantastical element or twisting it. So people can almost believe this could happen. So I don't like really the whole fantasy world where everything is foreign and different. I find that too unbelievable and almost feels twee. I really do like hinging everything in reality.
CA: Sure. So did you create a crack in the surface and did the hellions arise? [laughter]
DM: Yes, I did. Well, I did it slightly differently. In the end, although there was the crack and the gate to hell, I turned it on its head in the sense that actually humans were then able to get into hell and go through hell and rescue people who were down there. And they had all sorts of

mutations as a result of this experience, where they could start using the powers of hell for good. I took it a little bit further. Maybe that's a bit too twee.
CA: Cool. Harnessing the powers of hell. That's great.

[9:50] CA: And what about fictional characters? Do you have any favourite fictional characters from children's literature?
DM: I do. I love – I mean, he's not really children's literature – but I love Sherlock Holmes. Without a doubt. When Arthur Conan Doyle created him, he made him so believable. And he's got to be the first superhero that we ever had. And yeah, I just love his character and his flaws. And yeah, without a doubt, he's my favourite fictional character.

[10:15] CA: Okay, nice. And are any of your stories based on your own childhood?
DM: No, they're not. Although I have often thought maybe I ought to delve into my psyche a little bit more and put more of myself into the story. I know a lot of authors tend to do that and they tend to have to really pour themselves into the work and it's a very personal process. I tend to do that with my adult self, not so much my kid self. Mainly, probably because I don't want to put myself in that situation. I'd be too terrified.

[10:45] CA: Do you keep a journal or sketchbook or anything like that?
CM: I have done in the past. Usually when I'm in the middle of a story, I keep a journal close so I can actually make notes quickly. With your cell phone these days, it actually has replaced the journal when you've just got ideas. My Notes in my phone tends to have a lot of ideas in there which I email to myself.

[11:05] CA: And do you have any recommendations to young writers for getting or organizing their ideas?
DM: Yeah. I mean, the getting of ideas. If you're trying to come up with an idea for a story and you just really don't know what direction to take, one thing you can do is write out the plot cards, then lay them out and then try to write something that way. The other is to really listen to the conversations that are happening around you and try and get a snippet of an idea from what's being said. Or looking at the headlines for the newspaper that day and -- not reading the article itself, just looking at those headlines – and that can sometimes inspire some creativity or spark of an idea. It's really about being open to the world around you and not closing yourself off and thinking that all the answers you could possibly have are going to come out of your head. It's using what's around you as an influence.

For example, I just remember walking down this market and really wanting to come up with an idea for a story and just hitting a blank wall at every point. So I stopped thinking about the story and just taking in what was around me. And instantly, I looked up and I saw this window and I could see my reflection in the window, which was horrifying, but behind the window just where my reflection was standing, there was a painting. And it was almost like I was superimposed in the painting. And immediately I had this idea for this ghost story actually and I've been developing it ever since. And that was just by taking a break from trying to come up with an idea and just listening and looking at the world around me. And that was enough to see some inspiration.

[12:40] CA: Yeah, very nice. That's great. And you said you might spend more time revising than drafting, and that is not atypical of writers. But is there a typical process -- I know you write different types of books — about what percentage of time would you spend drafting and what percentage revising?
DM: So, just to put this into sort of recent context, when I wrote *What does a Caterpillar Do*? I must've spent easily five or six times as long editing it as I did writing it. That's partly because the book is very short, 380-odd words in it, it's a question-answer format, so it's fairly straightforward and easy to write. You have to do a bit of research to bring in the right characters. But then it takes not very long to write it and a lot more time to edit it. When you're writing a longer book, I tend to probably do the same amount of editing but in terms of proportion of the book, it's probably two or three times as long editing as I did writing it.

[13:34] CA: Okay, great. And do you have any advice to young writers about revising?
DM: A little trick that I used to use –you need to do this in the smaller books -- but one of the tricks I used to do when I was working for some communication departments, when I was reviewing something, I would read it backwards. And it allowed you to spot grammatical errors easier because you were actually looking for things more than just letting the book flow through. So that's another little technique that I tend to try and use. But again, it really only works on the smaller stories. When you've got a 500-page book, trying to read it backwards becomes a bit more of a challenge.

[14:05] CA: Okay. And do you ever read your work out loud?
DC: Yes, I do. Usually to my kids and my wife, normally as a bedtime story for either of them. I'll read them when we're sitting at the campfire. I'll read them to them when we're going on a trip somewhere and they're bored. Often I can also just remember what I've written, so I won't even read it using the book. I'll actually just start from what I remember. The problem with that is that you can end up coming up with a new idea, which means you end up rewriting what you've already written. So I do find it very beneficial, partly because it allows you to live your characters as opposed to reading the characters which, in turn again, I think really helps to push the development of them.

[14:45] CA: And do you have a regular writing practice?
DM: Probably not. I probably should. I have always believed that the best way for me to write is when I'm, kind of like Arthur Conan Doyle in the Sherlock Holmes book wrote that the best way of thinking is in a cardboard box. So I have a location I like to go to where I can completely remove all stimuli and it's just a darkened room. And when I was living in England, we had an attic which I used to go into. It had this old oil lamp I would set up on a pile of boxes – I can see the house going up in flames there -- and I would write in that situation, partly because as I say, it removed all stimulus away from you. It's a little bit more tricky to do that when you have kids. They tend to barge in on you. So not necessarily a practice, more just getting your brain into a state of focus where you're not being distracted by your cell phone or the Internet or the latest news article.

[15:40] CA: Yeah, very good. Do you have a favorite POV to write from?
DM: Yeah, it's usually first person. I find first person the easiest. Having said that, the What Does? series I've written is not first person. But yeah, I would say first person for sure.

[15:55] CA: Okay, cool. Do you work on one project at a time or do you jump around?
DM: I do try and stick to one story. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I find if I'm writing it by hand, it's a lot easier to stick to that story. If I'm on a computer, it becomes very easy to just enter a new line, a new paragraph, and start something else. So yeah, I try but I'm not always successful.

[16:20] CA: Okay. And a few personal questions. You do tell stories to your own kids. Did you tell stories, did you have an off-the-cuff storytelling experience as a kid? Like around a campfire or at bedtime stories or anything like that?
DM: My parents always used to read bedtime stories to us. So we used to have a lot of storytime. Not so much someone making up a story on their own. I feel like I've missed out.
CA: Maybe. Although you know, most writers are really uncomfortable telling stories off the cuff. They would like two weeks to go and work that out and then come back to you with the story.
DM: I see. I've had a lot of experience with just making up stories on the fly. Sometimes I will confess, I borrow plotlines from other stories and weave my own interpretation into it just to help me. The problem is when you write it out and you show it to someone else and they go, Isn't that the plotline from this? That's called plagiarism.

CA: Yes. And do you have a favorite scary story?
DM: Oh yes. Without a doubt. So they've recently remade it as a film, and the film it is not as good. The book I love is *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill, and it's a fantastic tale, a fantastic ghost story. I have actually got two or three copies of it, I've got a version of it on the DVD, the original TV show they did of it, and I've seen the play. It's a fantastic ghost story. It's set in the early 1900s, so that really captured my imagination, going back in time, especially that period of time. And it actually features a young lawyer heading into the remote English countryside. And he's got to process a whole lot of paperwork for this deceased client. And while he's in this location he discovers that the town he's visiting is pretty somber. There's not many kids. And as the story progresses, he starts learning as to why that is the situation. And eventually he's asked, Who is the woman in black? It's quite a spine-chilling story and I think it's a very good ghost story.
CA: It does not have a happy ending.
DM: It did not have a happy ending. But yeah, I've had a lot of little debates with my friends about it because some people feel that a ghost should be tied to a location, whereas obviously she is not. I still get chills when I read the story now, even though I've read it easily 20, 30 times.

[18:30] CA: Excellent. And do you have any phobias?
DM: I do. Do I have to tell you?
CA: Not if you think I might cruelly play a trick on you.
DM: I do have a phobia. I can't stand scorpions. Even talking about them, I get on edge. I think it stems from—
CA: It's the tail.
DM: Yeah. Thank you. [laughter] I'm turning off the screen now. Yeah, so this this phobia of scorpions really stems from a visit I had to a science fair in the UK when I was probably 10-11 years old. They had this table of specimens, and it was fascinating. They were all dried and

covered with glass; you couldn't accidentally kill yourself by touching one. But they had this little piece of paper on the desk and it said it contains a scorpion. Well, when you start opening it up, it had this mechanism in it where this elastic band would suddenly go off and it would cause the entire paper to suddenly shake. And I think that moment freaked me out enough that I've never recovered. My kids love the fact.
CA: Have you ever turned your fears into fiction? Have you ever put a scorpion in a book?
DM: Seeing as I struggle to even say the word…
CA: All right. So no. That is a true phobia.

[19:45] CA: All right. And that's pretty much all my questions, unless you happen to be the seventh son of a seventh son?
DM: I'm afraid not. I grew up reading that book, from The Dark is Rising sequence, and loving that book. In fact, the cover terrified me. I think it's Herne the hunter in the original version that came out in the UK. My brother had it on his bookcase. And I was always stealing books from him because he had the grown-up books. He was three years older than me, and despite not being able to read for a while – I had really bad dyslexia growing up, so as soon as I could read I just read everything I could find. But he had this book of The Dark is Rising and the picture of Herne the hunter terrified me so much, I would skip past it. And eventually I was brave enough to actually take it off the shelf and open it up and start reading it. And I was captivated by that story. Yeah, I think it's one of the stories that have heavily influenced me as well as a writer.

[20:40] CA: That's great. And you mentioned your dyslexia…
DM: It's part of the reason I wrote the What does? series, actually, was because I really wanted to write a book that worked for kids who perhaps couldn't sit down and just follow the regular pattern. So that's why it's a very illustrative book. But it's taking a question and answer approach, so you have the repetitiveness, but then it really uses humour as a way of tying it all together. And when adults are actually reading the story to kids, it leads to that back and forth. It's not just a case of the adult reading the story. The kids love shouting out, "No!" They get to answer the question and there's bit of a dialogue. So I really wanted to create an interactive book helping kids, give kids the confidence to read.

[21:25] CA: That's great. All right. And that's all my questions for you, David. You've been so generous. So it was very nice to meet you virtually.
DM: You too. Thank you so much for having me on the show.
CA: It's a pleasure. Okay, bye.
DM: Bye.
[music]

[21:40] David McArthur introduces himself

And in case you've forgotten who you're listening to, here's a last bit from David McArthur in his own words.
[music]
I'm a children's and young adult author. I've actually had four books published. And my latest is *What Does a Caterpillar Do?* which actually was the number one bestselling book in Canada. And it was written in memory of two little girls, Chloe and Aubrey Berry, who sadly lost their

lives in 2017. And all the profits from that book are being donated to the Victoria Child Abuse Prevention and Counseling Centre. As a writer, I've been writing stories for really as long as I can remember. My dad used to have this really old laptop that I used to type out stories on and my mom would review it and say, You really need to slow down and actually think about what you're writing. So yeah, I've loved stories, I love telling stories to my kids and my wife, and it's been a big part of my life.
[music]

[22:35] Find out more about David McArthur

You can hear more creative writing advice from David McArthur on Cabin Tales Episode 5.5, "Author Interviews about Tension," 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 anecdotes and advice that you won't find here in the leftovers.

You can find out more about David McArthur and his books from the "What Does…?" series website at Morello.ca/aKidsAuthor. You can read about the origin and inspiration for the series. And you can watch an animated version of "What Does a Doctor Do?" and listen to a reading of "What Does a Caterpillar Do?" So check it out, and learn more about David McArthur and his books.
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[23:40[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 picture book author Lisa Dalrymple, who joins me from Ontario. That's next Friday on Cabin Tales.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.
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