Cabin Tales Episode 4.5: Author Interviews about Plotting

Full episode Transcript (by Catherine Austen)

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Welcome to Cabin Tales: Spooky Stories for Young Writers. This is Episode 4.5: "Author Interviews about Plotting." I'm Catherine Austen. And my guests today are great Canadian writers Cary Fagan, Philippa Dowding, Raquel Rivera, Ishta Mercurio, and Kari-Lynn Winters. Today's episode is a "talking tales" format, which mean it's all interviews, extending last week's episode, "Bad Things Happen," and keeping the focus on the subject of plotting. You'll hear how—and when—my guest authors do their plotting, how they feel about tormenting their characters with obstacles and escalating tension, and what they recommend to young writers who want to improve their own plotting. Bad things are happening in stories, but good things are happening right here on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

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[1:15] When to plot your story

You've probably heard the advice to outline your story before you begin to draft. If you've written stories in school, you might have had to brainstorm ideas on paper first, then fill in a plot graph with a series of things that will happen in your story, all before you write any of the story itself. Some professional writers do craft their stories that way. But many, many don't.

Writing doesn't often happen in neat stages. There are stages we can talk about – coming up with ideas; drafting; revising – but these activities always overlap through the entire creative process. I have never met a writer who comes

up with all the ideas for a plot, and outlines it scene by scene, and then drafts it all out and actually sticks to every single idea without adding anything. That sounds more like a factory than a creative person. And writing is creative. Even campfire tales. No matter how much you plot your story out before you draft, it is through the act of writing that your plot and characters will come to life – and they are bound to surprise you when that happens.

Some writers don't plot at all in advance of drafting. Others plot as much as they can to help structure the book and guide their draft, but they often veer from the plan as they write. A typical process is this: An image pops into your mind and you just know there's a story there. So you begin to write. Or you let the story play in your mind a while, maybe a long while – maybe even years. You think of bits and piece of plot that you jot down in your notebook, along with scenes that come to mind. Whenever you do begin to write the story, you draft, maybe provisionally, maybe furiously, feeling your way through to something you think ought to happen. Then you step back and see if any of it makes sense. You revise bits and pieces, draft some more, come up with new plot ideas, draft and revise some more. Then you find that your character really wouldn't do what you'd planned for them to do. You despair that your plot is not believable. And then one day while you're walking your dog, you know exactly how it has to end. So you run home and write the ending, knowing that you're going to have to change a quarter of the book in order to get to that ending. But that's okay because you've found the perfect plot.

It's hard to teach that in school. So we tend to teach writing in neat little stages. But writing is kind of a mess. The author Louise DeSalvo says in her book,

The Art of Slow Writing, "During, say, an eleventh draft, I begin to see what I'm doing."

So writers are always plotting: at the idea stage, in the drafting stage, in the revising stage. If you have a complicated plot, it's probably true that the more you can outline the plot in advance, the major scenes and the movement of story, the easier your drafting will be. But if you can't do that – and many writers can't or don't want to – that's not a problem. Don't let that stop you from writing. Write in order to find your plot.

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[4:30] Author Interviews about Plotting

Last week, you heard that authors Robin Stevenson, Amelinda Bérubé, and Wendy McLeod MacKnight don't always know the what's going to happen in their books when they begin to write. Now you'll hear whether this week's guest authors are planners or pantsers (which means that you write by the seat of your pants, not having planned what will happen next).

First up is Cary Fagan. He's written over 40 books, including short story collections, picture books, and novels for children and adults. You met him on episode 3.5 talking about the inspiration for his stories. And here he is talking about plotting.

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[5:10] Cary Fagan on plotting before and during drafting

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CA: You've written many novels. Do you tend to know the end of your story when you begin?
CF: Sometimes. And it's helpful if I do know the end, if I can see the story from the beginning to the end. That does not mean that by the time I get to the end, the ending won't actually change. Just because I know the ending doesn't mean I know the *real* ending. Certainly endings are something that I work on and revise a lot, so they change. In *Mort Ziff is Not Dead,* that ending changed a lot. In some books like *Gretchen Oyster,* I probably didn't quite know the ending for that one. I like it when I have an outline, and sometimes an outline is literally one page long and just a series of one-lines describing scenes. So I have kind of like a basic scene list that can help me get through my first draft. That's super helpful. But my next kids' novel, which is called *Water Water,* and I did not have an outline for that book. Which is easier to do when you're like me and your books aren't that long. I think it's harder to write without an outline when you really have a long book, and easier to get stuck in the middle.

You know, when I teach writing, even picture books, I encourage outlines. Because it really is easy to get stuck in the middle of a story. It's really easy to think that you have enough. I mean, I for example, was thinking about writing a novel, an adult novel, and I was writing an outline, and I got stuck, you know, a third of the way into the outline. And writing that novel, I would have spent much more time writing to that point and then getting stuck. So the outline was really helpful in showing me that I had not developed this story idea enough to really write it, or even to write an outline yet. And I don't always know that. I don't often know that because I will sit down and don't know how the outline is going to come out until I start. But I think ultimately for me, it makes the writing of the first draft really easier.
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[7:20] Philippa Dowding always knows the ending

My next guest, Philippa Dowding, has written 12 books for young readers. You met her on episode 3, talking about where she gets her ideas. And here is how she plots them out.

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PD: I don't even start a novel unless I know how it's going to end. That's actually usually the impetus for figuring out backwards how the story starts. Yeah, I always know the ending. I may not have it absolutely set, but there's usually an image or there's a feeling about the ending that I know for sure.
CA: So do you think of yourself as a planner or…
PD: A planner or a pantser? Yeah, I'm not a planner. I'm a, kind of get inspired. There's sort of a tipping point. You know, there'll be an idea that keeps coming back to me and I reach a tipping point where I just have to write this, you know, I have to write it because it's the next thing that is insisting on being written. The middle is always a bit of a challenge and honestly, you just have to write through it, I guess, and then you can always go back. [music]

[8:25] Raquel Rivera follows her characters

My next guest is Raquel Rivera, author of five books for young readers. You met her on episode 3.5 talking about the inspiration for her historical fiction. Here she is talking about the difficulty of plotting.

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RR: I tend to wander in a lost way for a very long time. One manuscript that I can say is completed, I can tell you in that case, I was like 3, 4, 5 chapters in. I had no idea where these characters, where they were going. I was just putting it out on the page and following them, while trying to answer my own deeply personal question. But following these particular kids who are contemporary, they were holidaying in the eastern townships. I don't know anything about any of this. I'm not a teen. And I wrote the whole manuscript to a degree that I was satisfied with the solution. It was a mystery—it was a dead character speaking, so how did he die? And I thought I solved it. But a lot of editors told me that, yeah, nice writing but nothing really happens. So I developed another plotline, an inner plotline, trying to make stuff happen, adding a little more humor, adding a little more this and that, and I sort of wove something through in a very conscious manner.

My issue of plot is exactly that. I feel quite confident in my description, quite confident in my characters. I think I have an ear for dialogue. But my sense of plotting – it's very bad. That's all there is to it. I have a hard time with it, I think.

And that's what I'm trying to do with this current draft. You know, I want to take all of my skills and I also want to be able to make a really convincing, exciting, intricate plot, which requires planning. But I'm not that great at it. It's not something that comes naturally at all. So wish me luck.
CA: I do wish you luck.
[music]

[10:35] Ishta Mercurio knows the heartline

Next you're going to hear from Ishta Mercurio, author of the picture book, *Small World*. You met Ishta on episode 3.5 when she spoke about walking her way into story ideas. And here she is talking about plotting her stories.

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CA: Now, you did say sometimes you know the ending, but do you tend to know the ending of a story when you begin?
IM: Not usually. And sometimes what I know is the beginning and the characters and I don't know the end. In fact, I have a story that's out on submission right now where that was the case. I had a situation and I had the theme. When I'm writing, I take a piece of paper and I write the heart of the story, the one thing that the story is saying, on that piece of paper and I tape it to my desk above my computer so that I can see it. And so the whole time I'm writing, I'm writing to that point. And that helps me stay on track. You know, sometimes you go off on tangents and you get lost in the woods. And sometimes that's great. But sometimes you're just lost in the woods and you just feel like you're wading through soup. And that's not helpful. So I have that there. That's like my North star. And with this story, I started it. I knew who the characters were. I knew what their situation was. And I was writing and writing, and then I reached a point where it was like, I don't know what happens next. I have a vignette. But I don't have a story. There's no arc. There's no character change. There's no development. It kind of went to here and then it just stopped. I just got stuck at the top of that cliff. I had to put it away for maybe a month and a half. And then a month and a half later, it came to me. And I realized, Oh, this is the ending; this is how this story has to resolve. And so then I was able to finish it. But yeah, I don't always.
CA: But it doesn't stop you from beginning.

IM: Yeah, no. It doesn't stop me from beginning, ever. If I really feel attached to characters or if a story has gripped me in the way that I can't stop thinking about it, I have to write it. But then once I get to that point of, Wait, I don't know where this is going anymore, then I have to put it away until I figure that out.
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[12:55] Kari-Lynn Winters knows the end but not the path

Our final guest author today is Kari-Lynn Winters, author of many picture books for the very young. You met her on Episode 3 talking about her thousand journals. Now here she is talking about plotting her ideas into stories.

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CA: Do you know the ending of your story before you begin drafting? KLW: Often I know the ending. I just have to figure out how to get there in between. What often happens is I'll come up with the idea in general. I'll have a beginning point, and I'll have an end point, and I may not know the navigation of how to get there yet. Definitely my background in theatre has helped, because I try to think of pages as scenes. You only want one thing happening at a time in a picture book. If you have too many things happening, the illustrator can't draw all those things and it gets very complicated. You have basically 14 spreads, maybe 15 spreads. You have 15 scenes to tell your story. That's how I think about it.
CA: Filling in those 15 scenes is a process of discovery for you?
KLW: Yes, yes, and that's really a place to play. And sometimes I have to change the ending because it doesn't work. You know, the original ending may not work. It really depends on the story, too. I'm usually happy with it at the end, but I do take a long time to edit.

[14:20] Plot as character challenged.

So you can see that authors often have some plotting done before they draft, and more to do while they draft and while they revise.

You can think of a story as a path that a character is taking toward what they want. And plot is everything that gets in their way, everything that blocks the path or makes it twist into areas your character would rather avoid but can't avoid if they are to reach their goal. Plot is character challenged.

Children's author Gail Carson Levine, in her book *Writer to Writer*, says, "Just keep throwing characters into new situations and help them find themselves." That's really what plotting is. And by responding to the plot, characters reveal themselves. And by reacting to everything that blocks their path, they test their attachment to what they want. And if the reader knows what the character wants, then the reader will feel for the character as problems get in the way.

Aristotle said that plot is: a good man goes from happiness to misery because of a great error that he makes. But since Aristotle also said that wrens eat owl's eggs, should we really count on his advice?

He is right about the misery, though. Gail Carson Levine agrees that "Your main character has to be at least a little miserable at some point."

Readers want in stories all sorts of things they don't want in real life: tension, terror, anxiety, despair, hopes crushed, trusts betrayed, dreams offered and snatched away. If you want to be a writer, you'll have to make your characters suffer.

[music]

[16:05] Interviews about tormenting characters

I asked today's guest authors how they feel about tormenting their characters. Here's Philippa Dowding.

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[16:15] Philippa Dowding is a tormentor

CA: How do you feel about tormenting your character?
PD: [laughter] Ooh, a little torment never hurt. I think every single one of my characters is tormented. I don't think without torment you can have a story, can you? I mean, you need some conflict. Can you torment too much? I guess I have pulled back a little bit a few times. Sure, there's a few times. Obviously if you're going to torment them, you also have to have some sort of help, some aid for them. But I do, I have tormented all of my characters, I guess. And they come through the story with, you know that they're going to be okay because of the narrator or because of the kind of character that they are. So, I haven't actually—I don't think I've actually killed anybody.

You know, I think all of my endings are at least slightly upbeat. I think that's one thing about writing for kids. The difference of a book written for adults or older, or YA and for middle grade, is that there has to be at least some possibility of movement forward in a hopeful way. It doesn't have to be super hopeful. Some of my endings are scary, but then there's an epilogue that sort of wraps it up and puts a happier spin on it. Or they're slightly open-ended, too, that you can go either way with them. But yeah, I think leaving something really scary is maybe – unless I guess you're writing really hardcore horror but — not for me. I usually wrap it up, give a little bit of hope, give us all a bit of hope at the end.
CA: Yeah. The message, Just give up, is not a good one for any age.
PD: Even a book like *The Road*, which is pretty bleak, there's still hope at the end. There's a family at the end. There's a way forward. So that's really, I guess, that may be our job as writers, is to find a way through the murk.
[music]

[18:05] Raquel Rivera says torment is a sad necessity

Raquel Rivera feels bad about the tormenting she has done to her characters.

[music]

CA: How do you feel about tormenting your characters? Like that little girl [in *Orphan Ahwak*] – she's tormented. Like, a lot of torment.
RR: Very sad. I felt so sad for her. She was so good. I really feel for them.
CA: But it doesn't stop you from tormenting them.
RR: No, because we have to get to the answer. We have to get to the solution. I need to arrive at something that's uplifting for me but also real. And in order to do that, you need the challenge. You need the problem. Otherwise it's not a very good story.
CA: Yeah. We might as well just have real life.
RR: Yeah, like maybe I'll go fix myself a sandwich. [laughter]
[music]

[19:00] Kari-Lynn Winters wants some kind of hope

Kari-Lynn Winters usually writes picture books and she doesn't torment her characters too much, but she doesn't always give them what they want.

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KLW: It's interesting because people will often say, a story plot should start with a character, a setting, and a problem. I disagree with that 100%. I think a story should start with a character, a setting, and a goal. And then what happens is the problems come into the path of the goal. And then you can write the ending about them maybe not getting what they want but getting what they need. So sometimes they get their goal; sometimes they don't. And that's okay, too. As long as there's a hopeful sort of ending and you feel like, Wow, that character really went on a journey and I totally understand that. Because not everybody gets what they want. But sometimes you get something different and you just have to have a different perspective of it. All I know about endings is for them to be hopeful. That's always helpful, that there's hope at the end. Like not everybody dies and there's nobody left. [laughter]
[music]

[20:20] Ishta Mercurio is an enthusiastic tormentor

Istha Mercurio is surprisingly enthusiastic about tormenting characters.

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CA: How do you feel about tormenting characters?
IM: Do it! You have to do it. I mean, okay, it depends on the story. But in these types of stories, spooky stories, yes, you have to do it. Absolutely. The thing that makes stories satisfying is that we're empathizing with the main character, right? And the reason we read story is to learn something about ourselves and to learn something about how to overcome obstacles in our own lives. The whole point of horror stories and spooky stories is that the world can be terrible, and the world can feel impossible to overcome, and stories give us the tools to learn emotional resilience and to learn how to overcome that terrible awful stuff. Or if we don't overcome it, how to plow through it and stay resilient until we get to a better place. So if you don't torment your characters, then the story is no longer a metaphor for life. So you have to do it.
CA: I am writing a horror novel and I had planned to, you know, knock off one of the main characters each time. And I like them all. And so I just keep adding new characters to kill. And no. It’s not good.
IM: No. You have to kill the characters. Because if you don't do that, then you're lying to your readers. You're lying to the people you're telling the story to. Right?
CA: And I’m not inviting them just to hang out with these characters. IM: If you don't knock off a few main characters, then you're lying about what kind of story this is. But I would love to say, you know, the world is beautiful and wonderful, and the truth is that sometimes the world can be beautiful and wonderful if the people in the world help make it that way. But a lot of the time the world isn't like that because some of the people who are making the world are not like that. And I think that the great thing about horror and spooky stories is that it gives us the tools to manage that frustration and that dissonance between what we want the world to be and what the world actually is. And I don't think it's fair to lie to our readers about that truth, that the world can actually be really horrible.
CA: Yes, it can.
[music]

[22:40] Cary Fagan mitigates torment with humour

Cary Fagan is a more reluctant tormentor. He admits that his characters suffer sometimes but he finds ways to temper that suffering.

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CA: To make a plot, you kind of torment your character or you give them problems.
CF: You do, it's true. But you can also let your characters have fun. My books tend—not all of them, but I think particularly my novels—tend to have some humour in them. And I think that mitigates the torture to some degree. And I do think that there is humour in life almost always, except maybe in the most dire situations. So, in *Mort Ziff is not Dead*, his brothers do torment him, actually. I mean, they're my instruments of torture. But he finds ways of joking about his brothers that I think help him. In *Danny who Fell in a Hole*, he is stuck in the bottom of a hole in a construction site and can't get out, which is in itself kind of scary. He doesn't know how he's gonna get out. But he meets a character at the bottom of the hole—I think it's a little vague whether he imagines a character or the character's real, since it's a talking animal—who's very funny. So I tend to soften the torment with humour, I would say. In *Gretchen Oyster,* Gretchen is a character who's being bullied, and that is a genuine emotionally difficult experience, emotionally and in every way, really. And she has to, one of the things she has to learn, is that she has to tell somebody. She has to find kind of the permission to actually tell an adult this is happening. And I guess again, trying to find solutions.

If a kid is really engaged in reading a book, they are projecting themselves usually into the character, even if the character is very different from themselves. And it's a way of trying to think about life and how to live. I think we all, even as adults, we also read to try to understand how to live. And so we need to have the kid come up with a solution. I mean, the solution might be having the courage to tell an adult, because there are lots of things where kids do need adults to help them. But definitely we torment our poor characters. But by allowing them to find solutions to these problems, we also liberate them.

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[25:10] Classic and experimental plots

When the subject of plotting comes up, people tend to think of blockbusters and thrillers and genre writing, roller-coaster rides of tension, what we think of as "plot-heavy" books. But plotting is important to the most quiet literary novels, too. Even if the entire story takes place in a character's head, there is usually some momentum, or at least some organization, to their thoughts. *This is Not a Novel* by David Markson is one of my favourite books. It's experimental fiction, in which the narrator is an author sick of making up plots and characters. So he offers a series of notes and factoids about books and authors' lives and authors' deaths. And while it may not have a plot, it is organized and well-considered. It is intentional. It feels like someone saying something. It's not that I love experimental fiction. But what I love is opening a book and thinking, yes, this is someone I want to spend time with.

You can't really teach that in schools: be someone that the reader wants to spend time with. But you can teach: start with an inciting incident followed by rising action that culminates in a struggle in which the protagonist is changed. And all that is all good to learn, but once you learn it well, feel free to wander off the classic path.

In her book, *Startle and Illuminate*, the Canadian novelist Carol Shields has many wise words about plotting the literary story. She says that she felt like a pioneer of domestic stories, stories of ordinary people in ordinary homes. She felt that those stories had tremendous value but were never told, and that all the bits of life that never get written down are the most real bits. She says that the quest myth—the beginning-middle-climax-end structure—had nothing to do with the lives of most people she knew. And she also says that the love of conflict in

stories, the love of plot-heavy plots, leads to a skewing of reality. And she uses the example of domestic stories that tend toward betrayal and divorce instead of a happy marriage. And I might use the example of young adult books about drugs and crime and depression and abusive cliques, to the extent that ordinary mostlyhappy kids goofing around with friends are rarely seen in books—except maybe in horror, where they get picked off one by one.

So while I may be giving you plotting advice, my best advice is this: just write something that feels true to you. So long as you fulfill the promises of the story that you set up when you invite me into it, you're golden. It's when you promise one thing and deliver something else that you've lost my trust. So if you promise me a classic story, then you need a strong plot to deliver it. And take the advice of William Zinsser from his book, *On Writing Well*: "If you want readers to travel with you through your book, make some attempt to brighten the journey for them." With humour or hope or beauty or fascination or excitement.

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[28:15] Interviews about plotting advice

I asked today's guests if they had advice for young writers on plotting. Here's Philippa Dowding.

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[28:25] Philippa Dowding recommends keeping the end in sight

CA: What if they are not planners either and they've written themselves into something they're not sure how to get out of? Has that ever happened to you?
PD: Oh yeah, sure. And that's usually because I don't have a clear idea of the ending. I really feel quite strongly about that. So if you have an ending in mind,

there's always a way to get there, I think. So if you're stuck in the middle, I would think that, you know, you could sort of skip ahead a little bit. Or just try and, sometimes I'll just write a chapter that's pure filler and I know that I'm going to go back and I'm going to fix it or I'm going to tie it into the story somehow. But it's important not to get lost there. So if you can really think about what the ending is, you can find another way. I've deleted chapters. I think we all have. You know, I've started again, I've gone in a different direction. And for me, I have to write it to know. I can't really journal it. I have to write it to know if it's going to work or not. So some sometimes you just have to backtrack and re-do it. It's pretty normal. [music]

[29:25] Cary Fagan makes the outlandish believable

And here's Cary Fagan.

CF: If you really get stuck in the middle of a story, there are couple things. One might be to shake it up by introducing a new character. A new character can move things along. Another might be to have something happen earlier. So, it might be that you were thinking of having some important thing happen later in your story and you don't know how to get there. You kind of get stuck in the middle before you get there. Just to bring that event up earlier. I'll sometimes rewrite a story by taking some important event and actually shifting it, you know, much earlier in the story, and it gets the whole book moving in a much more energetic way.

I love writing a good narrative. *The Hollow under the Tree* is about a girl living in Toronto in the 1920s who finds that a lion that has escaped from a traveling circus is living in a park in Toronto, Hyde Park in Toronto. It's really the biggest park in Toronto and parts of it are kind of wild. And it's conceivable that, I'm sure there are coyotes and things that are hidden in that park. I really just loved this idea of, what is kind of an outlandish idea, that a lion could be living in the park. But trying to make that plot believable. And in fact, I've been really delighted because I've gotten a lot of emails from people asking me if it's a true story. And I had some reviews saying that it was based on a true story and that a lion had escaped and was living in Toronto in the 1920s. And I think the secret there for me was, if you actually have a very unlikely plot, you need everything else around it to feel very real, very realistic, to ground that very unlikely thing.

Unlikely things do happen in life, right? So if you make everything around it seem very real, it will make that unlikely thing seem possible.
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[31:30] Raquel Rivera converses with herself

And here's Raquel Rivera.

CA: Do you have advice that you would give to young writers stuck in the middle of a story, who've written themselves somewhere and they're not sure where to go?
RR: Whenever that happens to me, I actually start writing about *that*. So, I'll sit down with my little draft pad and I'll say, you know, *What's bugging you? What's the problem? Well, I like the fact that this is happening, but this is really tedious and boring.* And I just get that all down on the paper. And it's surprising to me, when I start doing that, then I say, *Well, maybe the problem then that you're looking at, what bothers you, is this. So can you get, you know, can you do without this? And how could you*? So basically, I'm having a conversation with myself on the paper, instead of trying to just, like, turn it around in my head. That has got me through a number of stuck moments.
CA: I'm going to try that.
[music]

[32:25] Ishta Mercurio puts a story away

And here's Ishta Mercurio's advice.

IM: Sometimes you just have to put it away for a while, and that's okay. It might be that you're not ready to finish it because you just don't know where it's going. Or it might be that you're not ready to finish it because your ability to tell that story hasn't developed enough yet that you're able to tell the story that you want to tell. And it's okay to put a story away for a while—for a few weeks or a few months or even sometimes in some cases a few years. It's okay, it's okay to put it away. You might pull it out again and try something and that might not work and then you can put it away again.

So two pieces of advice. The first piece is, you know, put it away if you feel that that's what you need to do. But know that you can pull it out again and you

can try all kinds of different things. You know, try different endings. Try a whole bunch of different things. What does this character want and what else can I put in the way? And the obstacle should be a little harder to overcome than the last obstacle, but not so hard to overcome that it's completely insurmountable—until you get to the climax, where the obstacle should seem insurmountable. And give them a false victory. Give them that point where they're like, Yes, I'm about to win! And then take it all away. You can try as many things as you need to until you get to the one that feels right. None of those experiments are wasted if they don't work. It's all part of the process.
[music]

[34:00] Kari-Lynn Winters asks "What if?"

And here's Kari-Lynn Winters.

KLW: I think sometimes as a teacher of writing, like a teacher of teachers, everybody wants the exact kind of format and a way to organize. And basically, once you know the plot points of a story, then you can go beyond that. I feel like you can play with that a little bit, and it doesn't have to be as organized. Because sometimes the best ideas come when you kind of understand the basics but you move beyond them.

I often try to think about something like a metaphor. So with the book I'm working on, The Masterpiece, there's all these seashore kind of metaphors about the ocean and waves and that kind of thing. So that can always build your story as well, because it builds the ambience. And then, also just always asking that question, What if? And don't worry if you get it wrong. Like what if this character is dealing with the bigger problem and also this littler problem? You can always layer stories. You can always add different kinds of conflicts. You can add new characters. What character would really bring out the bad side of that good character, right? Everybody's flawed and nobody's perfect. So what character would really irritate that character or, you know, that kind of thing? [music]

[35:40] The best plots are inside you

If you are in doubt as to what should happen in your story, discover what it's saying about life. What's the basic message, the basic human need, at the core of your story: that we are lovable, that life matters, that justice is possible, that suffering doesn't beat you, that wealth is worthless without friends? You don't have to know what your story is about in this way before you start—or even when you end—but if you're having problems with plotting, if your plot is failing in a way that you can't quite articulate, then dig in and ask what you're trying to say through it. Once you know that, you might be able to come up with plot points that challenge your character into doubting if justice is possible, after all, or whatever your underlying meaning is. When plot events are rooted in a deeper story – the need for respect, for love, for fairness, for trust, for safety – then you'll write a better story. Test and resolve a big issue in your plot, offer some revelation about life, lift up your reader into this big important drama. And use the heartline of your story to frame its plot.

One of my favourite quotes from a creative writing book is from Bill Johnson's book *A Story is a Promise*, and he reminds us what plotting is all about: "Because so many events of life leave people feeling unfulfilled, a story that offers a powerful fulfillment can create tremendous inner feelings of relief…. When the hero saves the world,… when the underdog rises up to defeat an oppressor,… when the unloved finds true love,… we are able to feel we could have that same experience. In those moments, the inner voices that whisper to us that our lives lack meaning, that we will never escape that which oppresses us, or that we don't deserve to be loved, are silenced."

So yeah, no pressure there. Plot something that gives life meaning.

Or, as an alternative, just have fun.

[music]

[37:45] Write your own tale

So with all this good advice in hand, it's time to write your own tale. Begin with a few ideas for your plot – how it might begin, how it might end, maybe one or two scenes along the way – and begin to write. Make us feel for your character. Show us what your character wants and make us fret and worry and cringe and weep when she doesn't get it. Give us false victories. Give us comic relief. Give us hope.
[music]

[38:15] Thanks and coming up on the podcast

I want to thank my guests from today's episode of Cabin Tales: Cary Fagan, Kari-Lynn Winters, Raquel Rivera, Ishta Mercurio, and Philippa Dowding.

Next week, we're back to a "telling tales" format, in an episode full of stories, excerpts, and prompts, plus a few interviews, all on the subject of creating tension. That's next week on Episode 5 of Cabin Tales: "Squirm."

Keep in mind that, at the end of October, I'll podcast a special Halloween episode featuring spooky student stories. I have a few lined up, but there is room for a few more. So, if you are a young writer – or you can write like one – and you have a tale to share—something a young teen might tell around a campfire—send it to me through the contact form on the website at CabinTales.ca.

If you happen to know a kid in Ottawa who wrote a short story called, "Game of Graves," ask them to submit it to me. I was a judge of the Ottawa Public Library's Awesome Authors youth writing contest last year, and one submission in the 9-12 age category, was a very spooky story called "Game of Graves." And

while it didn't win, it was in my top ten. And it was so good, just a perfect scary story. But I can't ask the author for it because the contest is a blind judging, so I don't know who the author is. So, just saying, if you happen to know a kid who wrote a story called "Game of Graves," send them my way.

You'll find a full transcript of today's episode on the website at CabinTales.ca, and you'll also find more information on the all of the wonderful guest authors featured today. Next week, we'll have some new voices on the show, when I talk about building tension with great Canadian novelists Lena Coakley, Sarah Raughley, and Don Cummer. That's next week on Episode 5: "Squirm."

I hope you enjoyed today's show. If you did, post a link to the podcast on your social media to recommend it to your friends. And write your own tale.

I'm Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.

[crickets]