

## Cabin Tales Podcast Episode 2.5: “Author Interviews about Character”

Episode Transcript (by Catherine Austen)

### **[0:00] Introduction**

[crickets; music]

Welcome to Cabin Tales: Spooky Stories for Young Writers. This is Episode 2.5: “Author Interviews about Fictional Characters.” I’m Catherine Austen. And my guests today are Caroline Pignat; Jan Coates; Lori Weber; Rachel Eugster; and Amanda West Lewis. Today’s episode is a “talking tales” format, which mean it’s all interviews, extending last week’s episode, “Nasty People meet Nasty Ends,” and keeping the focus on the subject of characters.

Today you’ll hear about my guests’ favourite fictional villains and protagonists, and exercises they recommend to young writers who want to develop memorable fictional characters. My guests have published picture books, beginning readers, non-fiction, poetry, novels in prose, novels in verse, and short story collections. They have created hundreds of characters who have lived in the hearts and minds of thousands of readers. And some of their best advice is coming up right now on Cabin Tales. So listen in.

[crickets]

### **[1:15] Interviews**

Last week, you heard from Tim Wynne-Jones, Monique Polak, and Karen Crossingham about their favourite fictional villains as well as their most beloved characters from children’s fiction. This week you’ll hear from more great Canadian authors about characters who’ve had an impact on them and their writing.

First up is Caroline Pignat. She's a two-time Governor General's Award-winner who writes novels, poetry, and non-fiction. And she's a teacher devoted to mentoring young writers. You met her on Episode One talking about settings, and here are her thoughts about her favourite villains.

[music]

### **[2:00] Caroline Pignat on Darth Vader and Gollum**

*CA: Do you have a favourite fictional villain?*

CP: When I first read that, it was like Darth Vader. And then I'm like, okay, is that really nerdy of me to still be geeking out on Star Wars? But yes. I still watch those movies, I love how when I first met him as a kid, he was all bad and scary and that's all we needed to know about him. But now – and I think that speaks to the way that the new generation of kids are today – we want to know their backstory. We want to know what made this person the way they are. And so you're getting a lot of kind of prequel stories about what made this character. Like the musical *Wicked* is all about that Wicked Witch of the West and *Maleficent* is all about the Sleeping Beauty witch. So we want to know who these people were and what made them the way they are. So it could just be nostalgia but I still go back to Darth Vader. I just like the idea that he was such a gifted kid and he had all this potential, and he was doing what he thought was the right thing for the people he cared most about. And it came out of his wound in the sense that somebody hurt him and attacked his mother and killed his mother, so he got he wanted to get revenge but protect the people that he loved. I thought that was a really powerful drive for an evil character. So even though when we first meet him in the 70s in those first Star Wars movies, he's very one-sided, just the bad guy there to cause

problems for the main characters. But in later series, we see more into his character and who he is and why he does what he does. If you read *The Gospel Truth*, it's kind of a spoiler alert, but the fact that she is connected to the owner, to her owner, in some way — that was inspired by Star Wars. So a lot of the people I write about are inspired by the movies and the books that I watch. But yeah, I find it really interesting. Gollum would be a second, just because again he's not all bad and he's not all good and he's torn. He has that inner struggle kind of thing that I really like. You don't know what he's going to do. You don't know if you can rely on him but you need him, and I think that really makes for an interesting evil character.

[music]

#### **[4:10] Jan Coates on Skellig, The Nest, and Kate DiCamillo**

Next you're going to hear from Jan Coates, also a teacher by trade. Jan has written picture books, easy readers, and novels. She joins us from the east coast. You met her in Episode 1.5, where she told us that she is all about characters as both a reader and a writer. And here she is sharing some of her favourite spooky books and favourite children's novels.

[music]

*CA: Do you have a favourite fictional villain?*

JC: Yeah and I was thinking, I can't even think of a villain. I must be reading too many sweet books or something. I could think of a couple of spooky books that jumped out at me, and one of them is called *Skellig*. It's published in the late 90s by David Almond. I then went on to read all his books. It's hard to explain but it combines a real-life situation with this kind of, so even at the end of the book you

don't know was that creature real? Was it an angel? Was it a giant crow? It was spooky in that way that you don't know. And then *The Nest* by Kenneth Oppel was a very similar book but it was about hornets. And it was the same thing, you didn't know – like it was really scary because of these hornets, and there was a baby and a boy, and you didn't know, was it real? Like which part was real? Was the boy having a mental breakdown? So I don't know if that's exactly spooky but it's the type of thing where you're trying to figure it out the whole time.

*CA: I agree. I've never looked at wasps the same way since that book. That character was so unnerving. So other favourite characters from children's books?*

JC: Yeah, and this is an easy one. I'm a huge Kate DiCamillo fan. If I could be anybody, I'd be Kate DiCamillo, or be able to write like her. I just love her characters. She just combines that sort of poignancy with funny and I can't get enough. I read *Winn-Dixie* at least once a year just because I'm jealous, I guess, and trying to figure out how does she do that? So India Opal Buloni is the girl in that one.

*CA: Did you read the one with the squirrel and the vacuum cleaner?*

JC: Oh yeah, *Flora and Ulysses* – it's so funny.

*CA: Mmm-hmm. And yet it's poignant.*

JC: Oh yeah, like they're serious books. They're all serious. They're about homelessness and missing mothers and everything. But she just has that touch, you know. It's really quite something.

[music]

**[6:45] Lori Weber on Heathcliffe, Remington, and favourite characters**

Jan is not my only guest who had a hard time thinking of villains, especially “favourite” villains. My next guest author, Lori Weber, also found it much easier to talk about favourite protagonists than favourite villains. Lori is a Montreal-based author of short stories and novels in both prose and verse. You met her in the very first episode of Cabin Tales, talking about settings. And here she is talking about characters.

[music]

*CA: Do you have a favourite fictional villain?*

LW: Oh, I was so stumped when you asked that question. I mean, I immediately thought of Heathcliffe as a villain—

*CA: Oh, he is!*

LW: But such an alluring villain, like he’s a villain you would really want to get to know. And then I went from Heathcliffe to Templeton from *Charlotte’s Web*. Because I just love him. He’s my favourite character in that book and I think he has some of the greatest lines and he’s the underappreciated villain who everybody likes to slag off but turns to when they need a favour. So I don’t know, those were the only two that I could really think of.

*CA: And what about other favourite characters?*

LW: I’m really drawn to characters in books that have a really strong voice. You know, when you finish reading the book, you keep hearing them speak in your mind. *Ellen Foster* is one that came to mind when I was thinking about that question. She’s got just such a strong voice, such a strong way of speaking, and she’s such a spunky little character, you know. She’s a little orphan, her-against-the-world kind of character. I realized when I was making my list, I really am drawn to strong female heroines who really had some bite, you know, and know

how to stand up for themselves and how to fight for themselves. Violet from *Feed* came to mind immediately. I love her for her intelligence and her tenderness. It was an interesting exercise when you asked me that question, because I really thought of the type of female character I'm really drawn to. And they're all really smart. Sticking with the Bronte theme, Jane Eyre is another one, I think for the same reason, you know. That intelligence, and that spunk. She doesn't let anybody put her down. Those are qualities I admire. Not kind of toughness in the sense of bullying, but just a capacity to – even though it's not easy to do – for standing up for yourself in the end. Self-love, you know, taking care of yourself. I think that's what all those characters do so well. They don't necessarily have other people taking care of them, but they've learned how to really nurture and take care of themselves. [laughs] I wasn't an orphan. I had loving parents. But just that learning to take care of yourself in the world, I think it's so important.

[music]

#### **[9:40] Rachel Eugster on villains and beloved characters**

Next you're going to hear from Rachel Eugster, an Ottawa-based playwright, actor, choral conductor, and author whom you met in Episode 1.5 talking about settings. Rachel does have a favourite villain to share, but far too many favourite characters to list them all.

[music]

*CA: Do you have a favorite fictional villain?*

RE: Again I have to go back to things that impressed me when I was very young. And although my lens on this particular book changed when I reread it as an adult – substantially – I think one of my favorite fictional villains is Miss Slighcarp from

Joan Aiken's *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*. Well as a child I found it incredibly – oh I can't even come up with vocabulary – I guess gothic, really. My sisters and I took it deeply seriously and literally. And when I reread it as an adult, I saw the incredible tongue-in-cheek attitude of the author. But that Miss Slighcarp terrified us, terrified us. She was awful. And the predicament those poor children get themselves in. I highly recommend it to young readers, but then I recommend reading it again when you grow up because it's a very different work. She's the governess, by the way. There are two or three children and one of them is the heiress whose parents go off to Europe, leaving her in the charge of dear Miss Slighcarp, and Miss Slighcarp is not so dear and creates a very dangerous situation for the kids.

CA: *Do you have any other favorite characters from children's books?*

RE: Oh so so many favorite characters. I mean, I want to name a whole box full of them! But I think of the *Green Knowe* books by LM Boston. They're amazing. I love many of the characters she created. I love many of the characters that Tove Janssen created in the *Moomintroll* series. They're amazing, and favourites among them? Many many favourites. But I would name Snufkin and Little My as perhaps particular favourites but that shifts, of course, depending on mood and when I read them. My reading as a as a child reader and even an adult reader reading for fun is very different from my more analytical reading as a writer. So I don't know that I've looked at characters in isolation of the books themselves that I can just dig out of my head. I mean, who doesn't love Harriet the Spy? So many many many wonderful characters.

[music]

## **[12:20] Amanda West Lewis on her favourite characters**

Our final guest author today is Amanda West Lewis, whom you met in Episode 1.5. Amanda is a theatre director, actor, and author of both fiction and non-fiction. And she has two favourite truly villainous villains.

[music]

*CA: Do you have a favorite fictional villain?*

AWL: Well, yes, I suppose I do. One is a cheat because it's really from the movie of "The Wizard of Oz." I mean, I think the best villain in the world is the Wicked Witch of the West. You can't get much better than that. She is just pure villain. You don't have to like her. You in fact can hate her quite joyfully. And yet she's so articulate. Who couldn't love that kind of a villain? You know and she just goes down in a flame and it's quite glorious. But that isn't from a book. I mean, she is fictional, but that's the adaptation which I'm very drawn to.

So when you asked me this question, I thought about a villain that had stuck in my head that plays a minor minor minor role in *The Phantom Tollbooth*. *The Phantom Tollbooth* has all sorts of wonderful little villains in it and he's the Terrible Trivium, and I'm going to read this because I wrote it down so I remember it: He's the demon of petty tasks and worthless jobs, an ogre of wasted effort and monster of habit. And he's very erudite, dressed in a beautiful suit, very calm, very kind, but has no expression on his face. He's utterly featureless. But he convinces our heroes of the story that he really, could they please do him a little favour, just a little task, please? And they become enchanted by him. Please, he just needs a little favour, oh, thank you so much. It's this pile of sand—I need it moved from here to here, but all I have are these tweezers. And they start doing



this. And he gives each of them a different task and they start doing this because he's so nice and they would do anything for him. But of course it's a totally useless task and they get distracted by this useless task. And they get waylaid on their journey, and they don't know that the other monsters are coming to get them while they're waylaid on this journey. And I think that is truly villainous in a way that the Wicked Witch of the West isn't villainous, because this is the human villain. It's your own worst enemy, where you get distracted by petty tasks and you don't do the task at hand. So that's for me an important villain in my life.

*CA: Yes I know that villain well. And do you have some other favourite characters from children's books?*

AWL: There are quite a few, and it's hard to answer the question really with detail because, I mean, the first ones that come to mind are the classics. I fell in love with both Mole and Ratty from *Wind in the Willows* when I was a child and they're always with me. Winnie the Pooh is always with me, Tigger is always with me. Alice has played an enormously big part in my life. She's subversive, and I do like the subversive characters. Like Anne of Green Gables, you know, the characters who are the ones who just really can't fit into the mold. They're misfits. And in the end, they help to change the world around them by being misfits to some degree.

[music]

### **[15:50] Commentary on empathy**

So you can feel the love that all of these guest authors have for their favourite characters, whether villains or heroes or something in between. And this love of course extends very deeply into the characters they write themselves. When I

visit school classes for writing workshops and author presentations, there are always some kids who like to read but are only just considering writing a story themselves. And I tell them, “You know that feeling you have when you love a book so much the characters feel real? Well, writing is like that times a thousand.” It really is. Because, really, we have to become our characters. We might bring them to life for a reader with various literary techniques, but first we bring them to life for ourselves by inhabiting them, by letting them inhabit us. And that happens, too, when we read. And it’s one of the reasons why fiction can enhance our compassion, because through story we project ourselves into the life of another.

In his short essay, “Don’t Write what you Know,” the author Colum McCann says: “The only true way to expand your world is to inhabit an otherness beyond ourselves. There is one simple word for this: empathy. Don’t let them fool you. Empathy is violent. Empathy is tough. Empathy can rip you open. Once you go there, you can be changed. Get ready: they will label you sentimental. But the truth is that the cynics are the sentimental ones. They live in a cloud of their own limited nostalgia. They have no muscularity at all. They remain in one place. They have one idea and it sparks nothing else. Remember, the world is so much more than one story. We find in others the ongoing of ourselves.”

In the last episode of Cabin Tales, you heard my guest authors talking about this ongoing of ourselves, about this empathizing with fictional characters, even the villains. Today’s guest authors, too, spoke about their emotional attachment to their characters.

Here’s Caroline Pignat talking about writing a particularly emotional scene.  
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**[18:00] Caroline Pignat on crying through a scene**

CP: I think to be a good writer, you have to have empathy, to imagine yourself, what it's like for someone else. I usually write in first person, so I *am* that person while I'm writing it. In the *Empress of Ireland*, the ship was – like the Titanic — it was sinking, and I was picturing my husband in the ship who couldn't escape. And I'm trying to help him escape as the ship is going down and he doesn't fit through the porthole. That character ends up drowning; in real life that person drowned, but also in my story that person drowned. But as I was writing the scene, I was sobbing because it was Tony that I was picturing. So I think empathy definitely helps make us stronger writers.

CA: *That's why you're so good.*

CP: laughs.

[music]

**[18:45] Jan Coates on sitting down with her character**

And here's Jan Coates talking of feeling such a strong attachment to one character that it felt beyond her control.

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JC: I went to a writing workshop when I was sort of in the early stages, and Kathy Stinson and Peter Carver were running it. They have a house here in Nova Scotia. So they would get six writers there for a week. It was like a dream situation. But I remember her saying, "The first time a character sat down" — you know, I think she said she was sitting at a picnic table and it was like the character sat down with her and they began to have a conversation. And so that happened to me in A

*Hair in the Elephant's Trunk*, and I was like, I just didn't believe it would be true. So when you can hear that character in your head, it's a really weird thing. And when you say it to kids, I know they're like, "What?" But then you actually know the character's voice and how they would react in the situation that you're putting them into, as a writer, I guess.

[music]

### **[19:50] Lori Weber on loving her characters**

And here's Lori Weber talking of feeling for her characters as if they are both herself and her children.

[music]

LW: I mean, I end up loving all my characters. You know? I just want to hold them all in my hand and put them in a nest and protect them, you know. Yeah, I loved creating Lou because he's the only male protagonist, main character, I guess I could say, that I've ever created. So I really enjoyed him. And all of the girls in *Deep Girls* are special to me in one way or another because they all contain a kernel of myself.

[music]

### **[20:30] Rachel Eugster on acting and writing**

I asked Rachel Eugster about the empathy required on the stage and on the page.

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CA: *And do you find that when you're writing, do you use your acting skills?*

RE: Oh my acting skills.

CA: *Do you become your character?*

RE: I wouldn't say that I *deploy* my acting skills, but I think the process of putting yourself into another person's head is the same whether you're writing about them or becoming them to portray them on the stage. So, I guess I would say my ability to do that is a practiced ability, you know, it's an accustomed skill for me. But I don't see, other than the familiarity of that process, I don't see that my acting skills necessarily give me an advantage as a writer. But both those skills are based in looking at the world through someone else's eyes. So they're parallel, and certainly they inform each other.

*CA: But Rachel was not entirely happy with writing evil, and the sort of empathy that might require.*

RE: I have a real problem with evil. I have a very very hard time justifying evil. In certain projects – the one I'm working on now is a struggle between good and evil – you have to have evil, but the evil can't be arbitrary and it can't just be – can it be evil for the sake of being evil? Some of the best villains are evil not because they like doing bad things but because their wants, their goal and their need, is in utter opposition to everyone else's. But that's not the only kind of villain. So I struggle with – and that's not an evil villain. That person may cause evil and great harm, but they themselves aren't necessarily evil. I have a problem with evil. I need help! How do I write evil?

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### **[22:25] Amanda West Lewis on making historical characters feel real**

And Amanda West Lewis spoke about building empathy with the historical characters in her novels.

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AWL: I think what most writers will say is they need to fall in love with their characters. In particular, my first YA novel, which was called *September 17*, the characters in there are all based on real people, so falling in love with those real people was very very important to make them go from all of the research I'd done on them and listening to their audio recordings and things, to making them connected to something real and warm in myself. There are some characters in that book in particular that I went through that journey with, and I shared their fears and in the case of a couple that actually die in the book – because that was true – that was heartbreaking for me. So they're all my favourites because I carry them with me all the time. And writing the book was kind of a tribute to them as people. So they are favorite people in my life that I wanted to bring into other people's lives.

*CA: And with the YA characters based on real people, did you still have a sense of discovering who they were as you wrote them, or did you feel you knew them from the start?*

AWL: I needed to find out they were as I wrote them, partly because anything you find out historically doesn't actually give you what people feel. Actually, an even better example is my second book, which is based on somebody I know. When he told me his story, he had no way of accessing what he might have felt at that time. So he could tell me the facts of his life but he couldn't tell me what he felt. In writing the book, I have to know what that boy felt, not in a huge huge way, but he's got to have some emotional warmth to him; he's got to have some depth. I can't just itemise he went here and he went here and he went here. So that was my own discovery of that character, my own invention of that character, based on

the external facts and also then based on what I know and feel about having been a child and trying to relate to it as much as possible.

[music]

### **[24:50] Exercises for young writers**

Writing can take a lot out of you, because of the empathy you have for the characters you torment through your plot. And as my guests suggest, all emotions including sadness and grief and joy and fear, are fertile ground for fiction.

I asked today's guest authors if they had any character exercises they would recommend to young writers. And they did. Here's Amanda West Lewis sharing the exercises she herself has done.

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### **[25:15] Amanda West Lewis on making historical characters feel real**

*CA: Do you do character outlines or write a diary in your character's voice or interview your characters or go around pretending you are your characters?*

AWL: Yes, I definitely do. Because of my theatre background, I do do a lot of conversations, and I do a lot of scene work, whether that's writing out scenes between characters in the book, scenes that I know aren't going to be in the book — they might have happened before or they might've happened after, you know, a lot of side writing. So I do do that. And some of that I'll just have as out-loud conversations and some of it I will actually write down. I will letter-write, especially if I get stuck somewhere in a book, I will get the character to get me unstuck by writing letters. And there is also, there's a writing exercise that I learned years ago that I find really fascinatingly useful if I get stuck. I will ask my

character a question by writing the question with my dominant hand. Now, I'm right-handed, so I'll write with my right hand the question. Then I'll switch to the pen to my left hand, so my left hand will answer as the character. What starts to happen is you do have this sense of somebody else answering the question. It's really kind of eery. I know some writers who've done this who just find it actually quite spooky because things will come up that you hadn't expected. Sometimes you sort of drop the pen and go, "Who's that?" But those things are always useful. You're not going to use that direct dialogue in the book, but there's something that will come out of that will be something to do with the character that will inform who he or she is, and you can then use it in the book.

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### **[27:00] Rachel Eugster on plotting characters**

And here's Rachel Eugster sharing the exercises she has done in developing characters in her own novel in progress.

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RE: The book that I'm working on now, which is a middle-grade novel, I am approaching in a more analytical way than I have in the past. I'm plotting before writing. It's a funny book. I had an idea and I just sat down and I wrote, you know, five pages or something. I wasn't sure where to take the story. And having learned a lot more about structuring a book and plot and so forth, I realized that what I really needed to do was sit down and figure out how to get my character from the beginning to the end of the book, and to do it through plotting. So now I have this enormous Scrivener file. And because this was my first experimenting with Scrivener, I looked at the little character grids and I thought, "Yes, okay," so I



started outlining each character and I did write a few pages in their voice or a few paragraphs in their voice. So I guess the answer is yes, I have kind of begun that work, but it hasn't been a customary part of my work before. But I'm finding it really really valuable and really useful and fun. And I'll know a whole lot about the characters and the world when I actually sit down to write the book that I wouldn't otherwise know.

[music]

**[28:30] Lori Weber on discovering a character as she writes**

Lori Weber is not a planner, and here she speaks of the joy of discovering a character as she writes and doing the preparatory work in her head prior to drafting.

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*CA: Do you do character outlines or write a diary in your character's voice or interview your character, any of those sort of exercises?*

LW: No, I really don't. I just start to hear a character in my head, and I just sort of inhabit them and I get to know them as I'm working on a book.

*CA: Me too*

LW: I'm not a mapper. Even with *Yellow Mini*, which was like Sybil-like multiple characters, you know, sometimes a new character would just pop into my head and I'd just sort of start thinking and talking like that character. They weren't all planned in advance. It was like, "Oh, here's this new character who wants to speak today. Let's see where he goes." I'm not a mapper. That, for me, that's the joy of discovery when I'm writing something.

*CA: So with, for example, Lightning Lou, did you discover him as you wrote?*

LW: I mean, he was based on reality, right? He was based on a true story of a boy who tried to dress like a girl to get on a hockey team during WWI, but that boy was discovered the same day. [laughs] That's not going to make a very good book, so we'll give him a longer life span. But as to who he was going to be and what his character – I knew he was going to be a bit cocky and think that he'd be the best on the team because he's a boy and they're all girls. But no, every book for me is just a journey, like getting on a train and you don't know where it's going, you know, you just trust that it's going somewhere good. That's how I write.

*CA: And would you recommend, then, to young writers to just begin? Or do you think a lot in your head without doing exercises?*

LW: I think I do a lot of the prep work kind of in my head and really carry the characters around with me and think about them a lot. I don't know. I don't like to prescribe because I know people who do do those, you know, those long lists of 50 questions you answer about your character. Like what's their favourite breakfast food? I don't know. [laughter] We're all so different in the ways that we create. With my own students, I would have them, more in terms of detailing out their character. So to really do a description. What is your character wearing? Body language – how do they sit, how do they walk, how do they talk? As ways of getting to know your characters. So I have done some exercises with my students. But I probably would never do those with myself.

[music]

**[31:15] Jan Coates on living with a character in her head**

Likewise, Jan Coates does not do a lot of character exercises prior to drafting, but she does let the character live in her mind, and it's through writing that the character will flesh out, sometimes to her own surprise.

[music]

JC: Yeah, so I do a lot of thinking before I'm going to start, but I don't necessarily write down details. I just kind of think, who is this person? For some reason, it's probably Peter Carver has drilled it into my head that people have to be consistent, right? Even if you're putting it in outlandish circumstances, they have to react in a way that's true to who they are, for that character to be believable, right? In one of my most recent novels, *Talking to the Moon*, the girl turned out to be on the autism spectrum and I did not plan it. It's just that she began to talk and I was like, "Oh, she has all these weird quirks. She's got to be on the autism spectrum." So anyway, she is.

CA: *It's a process of discovery.*

JC: Yeah.

[music]

### **[32:20] Caroline Pignat on connecting with characters**

And finally, bringing the conversation back to empathy, here's Caroline Pignat's advice that she uses herself and offers to her creative writing students.

[music]

CP: As far as characters, some of the things that I've tried and I've done with my writing classes is to start with your inner characters. All the characters I write that are character-driven, usually there's a part of me in them. Not that I went through those things, but I'll start with that feeling. The workshop I took with Jerry Spinelli,

before I wrote any novels, he said, start with an emotionally charged memory. And we all picked an emotion. I picked guilt, for whatever reason. And the story that I started to write about was feeling guilty at seeing my friend getting picked on when we were in grade eight and I didn't do anything to stand up for him. And that little seed of an idea, because it was rooted in a real feeling and a real memory, it was so easy for me to imagine a character based on that. So everything that happens in *Egghead* is made up, but the feeling came from a real place and I think that's why it clicks with readers. They can relate to that. So I mean, you could think about your most embarrassing moment and write about that, or you're the time you felt most proud, or your worst failure, the first time you said I love you to somebody, your moment of greatest sorrow or greatest joy. Any of those memories that you have are great sources for an interesting character. You're not writing about yourself. You might be at the very beginning, but once you get it out on the page you can take it and change it into somebody else. So that really helped me, to kind of start with somebody inside of me.

The other place that we find characters that are all the people around us. So a lot of the characters in the stories I write, people will say, "Oh that that was me, wasn't it? That's me in your book." Especially when I write about high school students. When *Shooter* came out, a lot of my students were like, "Miss, you totally wrote about me in your book. That's me." And they are very similar, but I wrote the book many years before – it takes so long for a book to get published – it was written long before I was teaching these kids. But I had observed enough kids to see that there are common struggles that they all go through. And so when I wrote it, inspired by some of the people I had seen, it resonated with the people who I was currently teaching. They thought it was them.

I like to add more than one person to that mix. I kind of think of it like a character is like a big pot, and you're adding all these different ingredients of parts of yourself, people you've observed, research you've done. If the character has, like, say if they're adopted or something and you don't know anything about that, you would have to go do research. All of those things kind of simmer together and become the character that you write about. It helps make them feel real.

[music]

### **[35:15] Write your own tale**

So with all this good advice in hand, it's time to write your own tale. Start with a character. Someone based on a real person or someone you made up in your head. Someone you want your reader to love, or to love to hate. Maybe someone who encounters another character and they don't get along and you, as the writer, need to empathize with both of them in order to write them well.

Feel free to use the spooky story prompt from last week's episode, set in Swimmer's Graveyard. Or make up a monster or a monstrous human.

### **[35:45] Interviews on humans vs monsters**

I'm going to end today's show with a few words from all the guest authors featured on Cabin Tales this month who shared their advice on both settings and characters. In each interview I did recently, I asked my guest which they thought was scarier: humans or monsters? That's a question you might not have to think about if you want to tell a spooky story around a campfire, something you make up off the top of your head to entertain your friends for a few minutes. But if you

want to write more serious fiction, stories that burrow into a reader's mind and stay there, stories that make a reader wonder about the world, not just the world of the story but the world we all spend our brief lives in, then this is a question you should think about. Who are the really scary characters in life?

You're about to hear – in this order – the voices of Caroline Pignat; Jan Coates; Lori Weber; Rachel Eugster; Amanda West Lewis; Karen Krossing; Monique Polak; and Tim Wynne-Jones.

[music]

### **[36:55] Caroline Pignat on deceptive appearances**

I think the scariest of the two would be humans that are monsters, like they appear as one thing but they're something else. When I was when I was a kid, that was a nightmare I used to have a lot. (This is like a therapy session.) I would go downstairs to see my parents, who were watching TV, but it wasn't them. But it looked like them, but it wasn't them. And when I watched *Coraline* – I didn't see that till I was an adult – I was like, Oh my gosh, that's that fear! Like he's tapped into that fear of: you're not what I thought you were. Where are my real parents? That scary feeling a young kid might have, which I thought was pretty powerful that he was able to do that.

There's so many faces to that person. You may know them as your mom, but their coworkers see her as someone else, and their parents see her as someone else. Like it's neat that everybody has a different face that they present in different circumstances. They're all true. You know, they may not be faking anything, but even we are different depending on who we're hanging around

with. So if you take it to extreme, where it's like the monster inside the person, that's like the Jekyll and Hyde sort of a thing that you have.

*CA: Horrifying. That you think you know somebody and they could have this monster inside. Very scary.*

CP: Yeah.

[music]

### **[38:10] Jan Coates on recent real-life monsters**

JC: I guess, because monsters are made up, so I guess humans. Because there's so many human monsters. As we unfortunately recently in Nova Scotia had that person in April that did that horrible mass murder. Yeah. So human monsters I guess would be much scarier. Monsters in movies and books look like monsters. Human monsters don't.

[music]

### **[38:40] Lori Weber on scary humans**

LW: I think human beings are infinitely scarier than monsters because they're real and they, you know, they can be monsters. We have some pretty bad monsters running the world at the moment, and they're very scary to me.

[music]

### **[39:00] Rachel Eugster on noble monsters**

RE: I think I have to go humans, at least in the current clime. Yeah. But I think we're capable of inflicting such horror upon each other. I don't think monsters are necessarily motivated by the same egregious things that sometimes motivate

humans. And look at all the tales where the monster turns out to be the noble one. Often those tales are really designed more to show you the humanity in the monster rather than the horror of the outward appearance.

*CA: And animals that we have called monsters historically, they're just living and they're just eating. They're not tying people up in their basement.*

RE: Exactly. Yeah. And look how we haven't even been able to find that Yeti.

They're out there somewhere, we think. [laughter]

*CA: They're taking social distancing to the extreme.*

RE: Exactly. And I think they have every right and every justification for doing that.

[music]

#### **[40:00] Amanda West Lewis on humans and monsters**

AWL: Humans, always. Always. I mean, monsters come from humans so they're sort of second best. But humans are the ones who terrify. And they create the monsters. Yeah.

[music]

#### **[40:15] Karen Krossing on monstrous humans**

KK: Definitely humans. Sometimes I feel like we're the most monstrous of monsters. Yeah.

[music]

#### **[40:25] Monique Polak on writing monsters from life**

MP: Humans.

*CA: Yeah. No kidding.*



MP: But that's why in a way maybe stories help. You know, stories help. If I can pass on a little bit of my experience to readers. And maybe not in a direct way, though I have written about this directly. I have written a story – more than one – about a monster. Human monsters, and monsters very much based on monsters I faced in my own growing up. I'm a survivor of relationship violence. And I'm lucky that I'm even alive, because I came so close to being killed. And people need to talk about it. You know, people need to know about it.

CA: *And you put that into So Much it Hurts, your own experience.*

MP: Yeah. That's in that book. And I have a non-fiction book on feminism, I mention it. I'm not saying it couldn't happen to a boy, but it certainly is far more likely to happen to a young woman.

[music]

#### **[41:25] Tim Wynne-Jones on monsters, humans, and monster stories**

TWJ: Well, I think that is in the end what *The Emperor of Any Place* is all about. It really is about what a monster is and what a human is. But I think in the end, I'd have to say that I think humans are more scary. Monsters betray themselves by being monstrous. In stories, monsters have horns and teeth and you sort of know where they live, so you don't go there. And if you get stuck there, at least you know what you're looking for. Humans can be monstrous, as we all know, and they can pretend to be nice. They can pretend to be anything. They can pretend to be the President of the United States. But they're monsters. So that's frightening. I think that's much more frightening than any monster could ever be.

*CA: I think that was for me the scariest thing about childhood, the questioning of are things the way they appear to be or are people, are they lying? Once you know people lie, they could be lying about anything.*

TWJ: It brings up a really important point: Why do we have monster stories? I think maybe monster stories, kids' monster stories, are preparing a child for the idea that there will be monsters. And that those monster – you don't have to say they're people. In fact, saying that they're people to a little child is really horrific, because it's like they're just beginning to build up trust in the fact that humans can be nice. And bit by bit, they'll learn the other side of that. They'll have a monstrous teacher at some point, probably. And hopefully only ever one. But as a teacher-friend of mine said, everybody has a favourite horror story about a teacher. And even if the rest are all wonderful, you only remember the monster. So, yeah, maybe monster stories of the dragon kind and, you know, those things, maybe they're all about preparing you for the real world.

### **[43:30] Story prompt**

So that's your story prompt for today: Create a humane monster and a monstrous human, and have one discover the other. Perhaps it's in a castle or perhaps it's in a classroom. And maybe you'll discover something about yourself as you write their interactions. I wonder which one will walk away from that encounter. Or slither away, as the case may be.

### **[43:45] Thanks**

I want to thank all of my guests from this episode of Cabin Tales, and from the entire first month of the podcast. It has been so much fun doing these interviews

and I'm thrilled to be able to share a smidge of the incredible knowledge and insights of my guests on this show.

I have a new batch of guest authors coming up in September, but you will also hear from these original 8 again, with snippets here and there in upcoming shows, and full interviews with each individual author coming up this winter when all my cabin tales are told.

You'll find links to the full transcript of this episode on the website at CabinTales.ca, and you'll also find information on the all of the guest authors featured today: Amanda West Lewis; Rachel Eugster; Lori Weber; Jan Coates; and Caroline Pignat.

And that's the show for this week. I know some of our listeners might be heading back to school next week, and I wish you a schoolyear free of monsters in all forms. And if it's not – if there are monsters in your life – then I wish you stories to get you through.

#### **[44:50] Coming up on the podcast**

On that back-to-school note, next week is Labour Day Weekend and I will be at my cabin, off the grid, on the lake, far away from my computer, so I won't be posting Episode 3 next Friday – I know that's disappointing. But instead I'll post Episode Zero: "What is Cabin Tales?" Because apparently podcasts are supposed to have an episode zero. Not everybody goes to the website to find out what's what. So next week you'll get Episode 0, in which I'll basically read the website pages and tell you about the origins of the Cabin Tales stories, plus a bit about the podcast format and plans for the season, and also submission guidelines for the Halloween show. I am looking for more stories for that episode, so if you have a

cabin tale to share—something a young teen might tell around a campfire—send it to me by email to [cabin\(at\)catherineausten.com](mailto:cabin(at)catherineausten.com); that’s Catherine with a “c” and Austen with an “e”. Or use the contact form on the website at [CabinTales.ca](http://CabinTales.ca).

So next week it’s Episode Zero. Then on Friday, September 11th, you’ll hear Episode 3: “Spooky Stories are all Around Us,” an episode devoted to finding ideas for story. And that one’s in a “telling tales” format, with stories, prompts, excerpts, and interviews, all answering the question, “Where do you get your ideas?” That’s coming up in two weeks, on September 11th, in Episode 3: “Spooky Stories are all Around Us.”

I hope you enjoyed today’s show. If you did, please share it with your writer-friends and reader-friends and teacher-friends. And write your own tale.

I’m Catherine Austen. Thanks for listening.