

Rogue Librarians, Bonus Episode
Author R.A. Spratt

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Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books.

We're your hosts, Dorothy.

Marian.

And no, Alanna today, but we are the Rogue Librarians.

Well, Alanna will not be participating in the discussion today, but we would love for you to participate.

Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook at Rogue Librarians Pod.

Today, we are excited to share our interview with R.A. Spratt.

She is the author of the series The Peski Kids, Friday Barns, and The Adventures of Nanny Piggins.

In her previous life, she was a television writer.

R.A. lives in Bowral, Australia, where she has three chickens, five goldfish, and a dog.

She also has a husband and two daughters.

We really enjoyed talking with her.

Dorothy, what was your favorite part of the interview?

Well, I also wanted to plug her podcast, which is called Bedtime Stories with R.A. Spratt.

Right.

And that was great.

But really, she was so funny.

I really enjoyed her humor and we laughed so much during this interview.

It was really a ton of fun.

It absolutely was.

And it was amazing to me how we really ran the gamut of emotions in this particular interview.

I mean, we went from the lightest, fluffiest stuff to just really intense stuff, including, and I want to put out a trigger warning here, mental health and suicide issues.

And of course, we are discussing Hamlet, which has those issues in the play.

So, but oh my gosh, she was just delightful, just so delightful.

And again, just someone I want to be friends with.

So what an amazing experience.

So without further ado, here is our interview with RA.

Spratt about her new book, Hamlet Is Not Ok.

Rachel, thank you so much for joining us on Rogue Librarians.

Yes, thank you.

I'm so excited.

I haven't had a book come out in the States properly for a few years.

Well, we really enjoyed reading it and are very much looking forward to the discussion, but we did want to ask you a couple of questions about your background before we dive into discussing the book.

What was one of the most influential books that you read when you were growing up, and why?

I really loved Roald Dahl when I was growing up because it's so funny.

Also, he has that sort of perverse, almost like a cruel streak.

I'm not sure that he's necessarily the nicest human being on earth, Roald Dahl.

I think when children are very powerless and adults don't think about how powerless they are, and children like seeing reflected in those books, the Roald Dahl books, the way adults can be so mean to them.

So there's the humor, but also the reality of the cruelty.

Sometimes children just have to endure with bad teachers or cruel people looking after them.

So I don't know.

I just really, really like Roald Dahl.

And then there's an Australian book called Hating Alison Ashley, which is by this author called Robin Klein.

And she was a very funny author.

She's still alive, but she's been, she's not well.

She's been in a nursing home for a long time.

But anyway, Robin Klein, she's really gifted at combining humor with pathos.

Like a lot of people do humor and a lot of people do pathos, but she's like a master of getting the two together.

Sounds like a good one.

Definitely does.

Yeah.

And I personally loved Roald Dahl as well.

I used to teach second grade before I became a librarian.

And one of my favorite books to read aloud, just for pure enjoyment with my class was Roald Dahl's The Witches.

And it was so fabulous because the kids would come up and pull my hair and pinch me and do different things.

They wanted me to take off my shoes.

And looking at your hands to see if you're wearing gloves.

Yeah, it was so much fun.

So yeah, I agree.

His books are just so much fun.

And it's great because we are a band books podcast primarily.

And Roald Dahl also has been added to the list.

So that's a whole other story.

But he's a complicated figure in many ways.

Very, very.

He definitely is.

Yeah.

But getting back to you, we wanted to ask you how it was that you decided to become a writer.

It was kind of by accident, because I never really thought I could be a writer because I was very bad at English at school.

I wasn't very good at writing essays.

And when I was younger, I couldn't spell.

So I loved story time.

I loved television.

But what I wanted to do when I went to university was I wanted to work in television, in production.

So I went and studied communications and that was my plan.

But I was wanting to make short films.

And to make a short film, you have to write a script so that you've got something to film.

And it just turned out I had a knack for that.

And I was good at that and I was good at writing dialogue.

And I found when I started writing dialogue, it was really liberating because I struggled so much with essay writing because I'm not very good at staying on track.

And essays are all about being rational and logical and having an argument that builds.

And I'm very digressive in the way I think.

So dialogue was really good because in dialogue, if you start to go off, another character can just say, but hang on, we were talking about this.

I just liked it was more Socratic back and forth.

And I found that really liberating.

So I started people saying, oh, you can write.

And I'm like, oh, really?

So I went to this TV show and I wanted to work with the assistant director because I still wanted to work behind the scenes.

But when I turned up to do work experience, the assistant director wasn't there that day.

So they just shoved me in a room with all the writers.

And it was a comedy panel show.

It was a bit like, I don't know what you've got on NPR.

You've got a radio show that sort of does the same sort of thing where, you know, people are making jokes about the news and it's like a game show.

Wait, wait, yes.

Wait, wait, don't tell me.

Yeah, that's right.

Paula Poundstone is on it all the time.

So I was writing for a show a bit like that.

And these are all men, middle-aged men.

I was a 22 year old girl and they didn't really want to talk to me.

They didn't even make eye contact.

They just shoved me in a room with like three newspaper articles and said, go write jokes.

So I sat in this room my own just writing jokes.

And at the end of the day, I handed them in.

And the next day, the head writer burst into my office and like, these jokes are frighteningly good.

I have been a writer ever since.

Like that was 26 years ago.

And I've been nonstop employed as a writer, a creative writer, which is very rare, as you know, in this industry.

It was like accidental.

Yeah.

It's like the opposite of everyone else's story of how they become writers where they have to work and fight for it.

It's like, I just accidentally did work experience and ended up with a job.

That's amazing.

Yeah.

Congratulations.

That's the way to do it.

It was very, very strange.

Because it's like that cognitive dissonance thing, too, of I had in my mind what I was going to do with my life.

And I remember sitting outside on the step and the head writer coming out to me the day I got off of the job.

And I was really upset.

And he's like, why are you upset?

You've just got this dream job because it was such, it was a really high profile show at the time.

And I'm like, just I've just got to totally reorganize what I thought was going to happen in my life for the next 10 years.

Yes.

That's great.

Thank you.

Yeah.

Thank you for that.

So your website mentions that you also host the podcast Bedtime Stories.

That's correct.

Yes.

With RA.

Spratt.

So tell us a little bit more about that.

Well, that's just a bedtime story every week.

What happened was I love telling stories to kids.

I really, really love it.

And I did a bit of stand up, you know, 20 odd years ago.

But as a writer, I missed performing and I like doing presentations.

But my favorite bit is just telling stories and reading stories.

So I always really wanted to do an audio book because when I was young, I had issues with reading and I loved audio books.

So I thought I would love to record an audio book and now I'm an author.

So I went to my publisher's Penguin in Australia and I said, can I please record an audio book of one of my books?

And they were like, no, we are not, you know, big enough.

It's too expensive to record.

No one buys audio books.

And I was like, oh, so I went away.

I got bigger and more famous.

And I came back five years later.

I'm like, you know, I'd love to do an audio book.

And they're like, oh, Rachel, no.

And so I was I'd been an author for ten years and I've been very successful.

I've done these huge festivals and I performed to two thousand kids.

But I was writing two books a year.

And so I'd written 20 books in ten years and I just I felt like I'd done all the things I wanted to do.

And then I and I thought, well, am I just going to keep doing the same thing year in, year out?

And I thought, well, actually, I'm pretty happy doing that.

It's a great job.

But I thought, is there anything I want to do that I haven't done?

And the thing that came to me was audio books.

And I thought, well, if Penguin isn't going to get me to do it, I'll just do one myself.

I'll just record one.

I can buy a microphone.

I studied all that communication stuff at university.

I know how to record something and edit it.

So I thought, I'll do that.

But I looked into it.

And actually to record an audio book, there's all these technical standards, which would have been tricky and I didn't have the time.

So I thought, I'll just do a podcast instead.

And I had all these short stories I'd written for my kids years earlier when we'd been on holiday that were like fractured fairy tales.

So I thought, I'll just do one a week and it'll be fun.

And so I started recording it and like I recorded like three and then I put the first one out there.

And then like the next week, the whole world went into lockdown with COVID.

So kids were frightened.

They saw every adult in their life have no idea what was going on and have no idea what was going to happen.

And it was really frightening time for kids.

And like in Australia, we have lots of people from Asia here and a lot of people in Asia, like in China, were literally locked in their flats, like with padlocks on their doors.

And so kids were listening to podcasts and they were looking for silly, happy, funny things.

And my podcast just hit that niche.

And so it just grew and grew and grew.

So now four years later, you know, I have four million downloads and it's just become this big phenomenon.

Yeah.

And it's not just that people are listening.

It means so much to people because it's been bound into these very difficult times in their lives.

So lots of kids with anxiety and and people, kids who've had bad things happen in their lives are finding great comfort from listening to these stories.

Some of them listen all through the night on repeat.

So it's become this big phenomena, all just because stories are so important and storytelling, it's so comforting to children.

So I sort of tapped into something I didn't even realize was there.

That is so powerful.

Just like your writing experience, just kind of good timing.

Yeah.

Well, people sort of say, oh, you're lucky and everything.

Yes, I have had a couple of things go incredibly well, but I've had thousands of things that have happened.

I've written movies, I've written books, I've written so many things that didn't get off the ground, but I've had 26 years of being dogged.

And yes, in the 26 years of just doggedly pursuing project after project after project, I've had a couple that have just absolutely flown out of the park when I've made contact with them.

Wow.

Yeah.

Yeah.

That's really inspirational because, you know, there's so many people who would like to have that impact in some way, and you just never know when that's going to happen.

Yeah.

And I sort of feel that there was an M.

Night Shyamalan movie once where like the whole thing, it's called Signs or something anyway, but it was Mel Gibson was in it and it was the whole thing.

The kids, all the kids had some weird problem and they're like, oh, the kids have all got these problems.

But then when they were attacked by the aliens, all the problems had been like designed specifically to be perfect, to help them in this situation.

Like the kid that put water everywhere, the kid that could hit a baseball really hard.

And I sort of feel like that.

I've had all these weird skills that I've built up over the last three decades.

Like I can sing a little bit.

I can do stand up and perform.

I knew how to use.

And all these skills that I had that I never used, they just sometimes they all come together.

And I just find that I have all the things I need to be able to do the right thing at the right moment.

And it's just like, it's like I never planned to be an author doing these things, but somehow I have just managed to have all the skills I needed at this point to make it work.

Yeah, it's cool.

It almost sounds like you're describing one of the characters in this book, Hamlet Is Not Ok.

But we will get to that.

Well, we will get to that.

I promise we will get to that.

Before we do that, we did want to talk just a little bit about banned books since, as you know, our podcast Rogue Librarians is typically focused on banned books.

And in the United States, we've just had record numbers of book challenges in the past few years, largely coinciding with COVID, which is when people, I guess, took the time because they didn't have anything else to do to really realize what the kids are reading.

Yeah.

And also what they're learning in schools.

I mean, the schools are very much under attack here as well in America.

But we were just curious if there's anything like that happening in Australia, or if this is a uniquely American thing.

Yeah, I was thinking about it yesterday because, you know, you told me this was what we were going to be talking about.

And I was talking to a friend and I was saying, I can't think of a school, a book being banned in schools in Australia, because I think the way we run our schools is different.

Like you have, like, you're, a lot of your government is at a small local level.

So you elect, like, your sheriffs and you elect your PTA.

Correct.

Whereas in schools in Australia, the government schools, they're more, like, run at a state level.

And the states tend to be bigger here.

Like, we've only got, god, I'm going to get it wrong, six or seven states.

And you've got, like, 50.

So the state governments run it.

So it's not as, like, individual parents can't get up at a meeting and say, I don't want this book in the library.

And if they did, people would look at them and think, well, you're a weirdo.

Because it's like, it's just, it's like, well, the attitude would be, well, who thinks, why do you think you've got an input on this?

Because it's, you just think of it as, yeah, these things are not decided at the school level.

So, and I don't, also, the other thing too is, in America, you've got a lot more influence of religion.

Australia is just not as religious, and it goes right back to the foundations of the country.

Like, your country was founded by religious settlers.

Our country was founded by convicts.

And we had, like, having been founded by convicts, it really, like, obviously, it's hundreds of years, well, 150-odd years since anyone here was a convict sent to this country.

But it has, to this day, some of those attitudes permeate.

And one of them is, if someone in authority tells you you're going to do something, your instinct of an Australian is, no, I'm not going to do that.

I was going to do that, but now you said not to do it.

I'm not going to do it.

It's like, jaywalking is really big here.

Like, I couldn't believe it when I went to America, how you don't jaywalk and you get fined if you jaywalk.

Like, here, I think if you tried to stop Australians jaywalking, you'd have a rebellion because it would just be like, you can't stop me doing what I want to do.

But having said that, I was thinking, well, when's the ban book?

We've got a big discount department chain, a bit like Target or Walmart.

It's called Big W here.

And the closest we've come to a book being banned was some staff at Big W.

There was a book about sex for kids or tweens, and some of it was a bit about transgender and sexual identity issues.

And some of the Big Ws said, okay, we're not going to put this on the shelves because people were being rude to the staff about it, saying you shouldn't put that on the shelf and being up in their face.

So they just said, for the safety of our staff, we're not a bookstore.

You know, these people don't have any say.

They're just like minimum wage employees.

We're not going to expose them to that.

So they did pull those books off those shelves.

But that's the closest you could.

But you would have no trouble getting that book from a proper bookstore or online in Australia.

So nothing's banned in that sense.

Yeah.

That's interesting.

It's very different.

We have a lot more independent booksellers as well than you do.

You tend to have a big book chain.

So there's more sort of control at a corporate level.

Whereas here, if you've got an eccentric bookseller, they'll just do whatever they want.

I like that picture of an eccentric bookseller.

Beautiful.

All right.

So I'm going to take a quote from your book that I think speaks to this idea or the problem of banning books.

And so here's the quote, quote, books are important.

The advance of ideas and literary expression is how civilization evolves.

Books are time capsules of ideas.

They're how knowledge and wisdom and art are transferred through time.

So that's the question.

Why should I sound clever when people say quotes?

I went to an event once and someone had this t-shirt.

I'm like, oh, gosh, that's a cool quote on your t-shirt.

It's like, it's from your book.

And I'm like, oh, because I feel like I'm not the person writing this.

It's like something comes through me.

Like I'm a conduit.

I don't think I'm clever enough to have come up with that.

Well, I was just, if you're not as familiar with the problem of banning books, you may not have an answer to this question.

But did you have concerns about what stories people are attempting to erase?

Because this kind of will get into the nitty gritty of the book here, but like how they're really attempting to change our future by...

Oh, yeah.

I mean, we're not, I'm not affected.

No one's ever banned any of my books.

But I have had them edited in the US, but that was for like, gone.

They took a gun out of a book, which I was quite happy to do.

I don't particularly want guns in my books anyway.

But the editorial stuff that's more sinister, but for me is more worrying, is the stuff that takes place before the reader sees the book, where editors project their own values onto your books in the editorial process.

And yeah, they're very woke and they're very concerned about not getting in trouble.

And that can be concerning.

And the thing is, their concerns then get up in your head and you start to second guess yourself.

And then you sort of not even write, start not even writing something in the first place.

So it's not so much that your book is banned, but do you know that you're going to have to have arguments to get this through?

So you just think, I'll stuff it, I won't even bother writing it in the first place.

Which is not good either.

Like in Australia, it's a big sort of ethical issue, whether or not you're going to have Indigenous Australian characters in your book, because obviously there's been so much terrible history, and also you don't want to get into a cultural appropriation where you're disrespecting their culture.

But at the same time, you don't want to not include Indigenous characters.

But then editors can be really funny.

If you have an Indigenous character, but they do anything negative, they'll say, you can't have an Indigenous character, because I write crime fiction, who commits a crime.

And you think, well, why not?

Because all the characters in my books commit crimes.

It's a crime novel.

And so you get into all these weird sort of things being sort of pseudo edited before you even get there.

So that is a concern for me.

That's something we haven't really thought of and definitely something I'm going to ask other writers about when we get the chance to talk to them.

Yeah, absolutely.

Because we've certainly talked about how librarians self-censor in that they just don't order a book that they think might cause a ruckus with the public, with their patrons, or in a school library, obviously, with the parents.

But yeah, I mean, we hadn't really thought that much about what the editorial process is like for writers.

It's interesting too, because the editors tend to be, like I'm 48, the editors tend to be in their late 20s, maybe, yeah, in their 20s, mid to late 20s, and they're from the inner city, and I live in the country, and they often don't have kids themselves, and they are just at a very different point of view in their life.

And they're trying to be really good, conscientious people, but it's not, yeah, it's a very complicated situation.

Gosh.

Yeah, that puts a whole different spin on it.

Thank you for sharing that with us.

No, because people think about book banning and these things being from the right wing, but sometimes you get issues from the left wing as well.

They're so trying to progress values and ideas that are progressive that sometimes they can be impinging on what you're trying to do as well.

So you get it from both sides.

Yeah, I can see that.

Well, the time has arrived, finally, Rachel.

We're going to talk about *Hamlet Is Not Ok*, and we were wondering if you would be willing to give our listeners an introduction.

Well, just explain what happens in the book.

Yes.

Yeah.

Okay.

Well, *Hamlet Is Not Ok*.

It's about a girl who's about 15, 16.

She's called Selby and she's at school and she has totally stuffed up.

This is all autobiographical.

It's something I did when I was 15.

She just stops doing her homework for like six months and gets really behind.

And she's not great at reading, so she just stops reading all the texts for English.

And her parents find out and they bust her and they're so angry and disappointed.

And they make her get a tutor.

And she's studying Hamlet at school.

And the first thing the tutor does is says, okay, well, you got to read Hamlet.

And so she starts reading.

He's like, no, no, no, you got to read it out loud.

It's a play.

You should.

You need to hear the words.

And so he makes her read it out loud.

But as soon as she starts reading it, boom, they're sucked into the play.

And they're like drawn in.

And it's all real.

And they're there with Hamlet on the on the walls of the castle in Denmark.

It's a freezing cold night.

And this scary force comes towards it.

And it's the ghost.

It's the ghost of Hamlet's father.

And they're right there in the thick of it.

And they're talking to Hamlet in all the Shakespearean language.

And Ophelia's there.

And there's all this love.

But of course, if you know Hamlet, then there starts to be violence, like serious, nasty violence.

And that starts to build.

And Selby, who isn't the most literate person, yeah, well, yeah, not the most literate person.

She's not the most well-read person because she struggles with reading.

But she just has this clarity of like, we have to stop this.

It's wrong.

And her tutor, who's been drawn in with her, he's like, but it's the book and we've got to let it play out.

It's important.

You know, Hamlet is an important play.

And she's like, I don't care.

It's wrong to let this violence happen.

And so then they have this thing of they work out.

What are they going to do?

Are they going to change the story of Hamlet so that it's not wrong and it's not violent and people are treated better?

And so they get into this sort of ethical debate about violence.

And there's all this talk about mental health and also just discussing the importance of literature and storytelling and how this famous story for hundreds of years ago in Britain, how important it is to storytelling today in modern film and things like that.

So it's a it's a story about a regular kid, but it encompasses all these other huge issues, social issues and literary issues.

Yeah, I really thought that that was really one of the strengths of the book is how it really did raise a lot of questions there.

You know, there was just a lot in there.

I know I always like to jam pack a lot of ideas into my books, and I don't really do it intentionally.

It's just that's the way my mind was stuck.

All these ideas I just wanted to start off.

I just wanted to write a novelization of Hamlet.

And then all the stuff with Selby, the publishers loved all that stuff with her and the tutor, and then going back and forth to her class.

So they wanted me to increase that part of it.

And then it just got into me thinking all about me when I was that age and the struggles I had with reading.

And also I was taking my own kids who are like 16 and 13 now, but I wrote this sort of three, four years ago.

So taking them to see Shakespeare and seeing them struggle to understand it and wanting them to love it as much as I did and trying to sort of make sense for them why it was important, even if it's difficult to understand Shakespeare, why it's still important to persevere and try because these books are so important, well these plays are so important.

Well, which maybe you've just answered the question, but I'll give you a chance to add on to that if you want.

Why Shakespeare and why Hamlet?

Hamlet, weirdly I did because I had never studied Hamlet.

Like I'd seen it several times.

I'd seen a couple of different versions at the theatre that were very different, and then I'd seen the Mel Gibson one and the film.

And so it was in COVID.

I had all this extra time because I wasn't having to tour and I wasn't having to take my kids to after school activities.

So I had extra time and I thought, as I said, I'd been taking my kids to see Shakespeare plays and I could see them struggling with it a bit.

And I just thought I'd always wanted to do something with a Shakespeare play because I had this idea that if you made it a novelization of a Shakespeare play that could make it easier for kids to understand because you could break it up into dialogue with a modern character and a Shakespearean character and give the difficult to understand Shakespearean language context to make it all easier for a modern reader.

So I had had that idea for ages bumping around in my head.

So when COVID came and I had the time, I thought, okay, I'll do this.

I started listening to lots of different radio versions of Hamlet.

And as I say, I think sometimes when you study a book at school, it sort of beats the joy of the book out of it for you because you've forced through our essays.

Because I'd never studied Hamlet.

I'd just seen it and enjoyed it.

I thought, well, I'll do Hamlet because that'll be fun for me.

I don't have any baggage with it.

So I picked that play.

Well, that makes a lot of sense.

And you just mentioned that your kids were, I guess, 10 and 13, then when you were initially writing the book.

Maybe a little younger, like 9 and 12.

So quite young.

Yeah.

So based on that, was your target audience for the book more young adult?

Or was it more middle grade?

Well, I was thinking it's funny because people say, oh, Selby's 15, so the book is for a 15 year old.

And I think, oh, what would make you think that?

Because kids who are like 10 to 12, do not read books about 10 to 12 year olds.

They usually read books about kids who are older.

They read like, you know, like they're reading like the Hunger Games and things like, I wouldn't necessarily pick that age.

So for me, I was, I was always thinking fifth and sixth grade, like, you know, 10 to 12, maybe 13, maybe.

But I must admit, I'm an egocentric person.

I like to think my books are for everyone and that adults could get a lot out of it too.

But it's, but yeah, it's, it's interesting to me that people, but they had to, when they released it, say it was YA because not because of anything I wrote, but because Shakespeare had so much stuff about suicide in Hamlet.

So they were worried about targeting it to younger children because of that.

So it's not like all my books are puffin books in Australia for the younger readers, but this is the only book I've written that is a Penguin book.

But, but it's, it's interesting because it's on shelves with the YA, which, you know, a lot of it's all this dark fantasy and all this sort of stuff.

And it, and because I, I'm not comfortable writing about those, a lot of those things, but it's not really my mindset.

But yeah, I was, I was thinking slightly younger, but anyway, the publishers thought it was, I think in reality, it's sort of 10 to 14 is where it sort of, it seems to be hitting with the actual readers who enjoy it.

Well, I can tell you from experience that those 11, 12, 13 year olds have a lot of interest in suicide in the books that they read.

So I'm pretty sure.

I know.

I will be picking it up.

Where parents and teachers think children are at emotionally and sort of culturally is not, is often not where they actually are.

I know what my kids were reading when they were 10 and also what they like, what, what people want them to read.

And then you think what they're looking at on YouTube is, you know, they're, yeah, they're like 35 year olds at 10 in terms of some of their ideas and the things that they know about.

And not necessarily what you would think either, but just, yeah.

So anyway, I, yeah, I said, so kids seem to like it and some teachers seem cool with 10 to 12 year olds reading it, but then some aren't.

And that's, I get that too.

So yeah.

Well, I did, we did notice that it seemed accessible to younger readers.

So it's interesting to know your thought process behind that.

Yeah.

Well, I think I was right in it with the same sort of, trying to get the same sort of language level as Friday Barnes.

And that's very much a nine to 12 year old level, but that's just, that's the level of language I would use for pretty much anything.

Cause even if you write for television, for an adult broad audience, you have to allow for the fact that adults, a lot of people have English as a second language.

So you don't want to use things that are overly complicated.

Anyway, you always want to express yourself in the, in the most straightforward way you can.

Yeah, I agree with that.

Well, I think you succeeded, so.

So the main character of this book is Selby.

And Selby's parents seem to be too busy to notice that their daughter's not doing her homework.

In fact, you describe her as invisible to her classmates.

And really, everyone but the nosy neighbors doesn't pay much attention to what Selby's up to.

Can you and you have already a little bit suggested that she's autobiographical.

Yeah.

Talk a little bit about how you developed her character.

Well, that was based, you know, it's just purely autobiographical, like the time in my life.

I always try to like when you start a story, you need to sort of ground it in either reality or at least emotional reality.

So the audience can connect.

I mean, it's classic storytelling.

You start off with something real and you draw people in.

And then you go on the story like classic Joseph Campbell story journey.

And then it becomes more and more fantastical as you go along.

So you're trying to at the beginning ground people in reality.

So I started telling them about me when I was 15.

And when I was 15, my mother, because my family's English, we moved to Australia when I was two.

When I was 15, my mother went back to visit her family for three months.

And my dad was a business executive insurance and he worked in the city and he'd be gone from seven in the morning to seven at night.

And my older brother had a girlfriend, was never home.

So I was just at home all the time on my own.

There was no food because there was no late night shopping.

So I'd have to bake bread and cook omelets to have something to eat.

And I was watching Days of Our Lives and Young and the Wrestlers every single day when I came from school instead of doing my homework.

And it's like I didn't think I was doing anything wrong because it just didn't occur to me.

Like I just I was just this was what I did every day and I was going along.

But yes, so I often look back on that time because it was very influential on who I became because I my parents got really angry.

They didn't get me to.

Oh, they actually did end up having to get me a math tutor so I could catch back up.

But they banned me from watching television for six months, which was a big deal because there's no TV.

No, there's no Internet or anything.

There's no other alternatives.

So I just listened to the radio instead and read books and that exposed me to so many more ideas than if I'd been just watching *The Restless* and *Days of My Life*.

So actually that period of time when I was banned from watching TV ended up being really influential on my life's journey.

So anyway, so the beginning of the book with Selby is kind of a portrait of that time.

In my youth, I was very bored in the suburbs.

Selby is in a country town like I live in and just being bored and there's nothing you can do.

You can't drive, there's nothing to do, nowhere to go.

And you're just walking home and throwing rocks in the river.

That's all there is to do.

Throwing rocks at the ducks.

Yes, being accused of throwing rocks at the ducks.

That's more influenced by my life now because I live right next to a creek.

Like this morning, I walked the dog and there's literally there was baby ducks and I was filming them this morning.

There's ducks everywhere here.

But that was such a lighthearted, funny thing that kept coming back up.

And yeah, I love that.

Yes, I wasn't throwing them at the ducks.

Well, that is actually based on a story that does not reflect on me very well.

When I was a kid and I was at high school, we used to go into a nearby city called Parramatta to play sport, and then you'd have to get the bus home.

So I stand at the bus stop once and there's the Parramatta River, and it was a bit like the LA.

River.

It's a lot more water in it, but it's more like a giant storm water drain.

It was just ugly and the water was all polluted and disgusting.

It was all concrete.

And one day I stand at the bus stop, and they were like about 30 meters away and at 90 feet, there was like a tortoise.

And I thought, there's no way that tortoise is real.

It's got to be like a rubber tortoise or something some kid has dropped because there's no way there's anything living in that river.

And like, you know, I'm just a dumb teenager and I'm looking at these, there's no way that's real.

That's got to be like concrete or rubber or something.

So I threw a rock at it.

I didn't hit it, but I threw it near it to see if it would move.

And it moved.

And the second I did it, I realized, you're a dreadful person.

Don't throw it.

It was a real tortoise and it did move.

It jumped in the river.

And I'm like, what did you just do?

And I was so horrified with myself.

And I never told anyone about it.

But then one day I told my kids about it and they have never let me live it down.

They remind me all the time, he threw a rock at a tortoise.

And I took them to Sydney and showed them the spot where.

And now the river has been totally rehabilitated and it's beautiful.

And they're like, you threw a rock at a tortoise here.

I'm like, you got to understand.

It was worse.

It was like industrial.

That's awesome.

That's a great story.

But that idea of doing something that you shouldn't have really done in the moment and then just never living it down.

That's where that came from.

Oh, yeah.

And our own personal kids in particular love to just hold us accountable for those things because it's like you said about the rural doll.

Kids don't have that much control.

So if they have something over you, they're going to use it.

Oh, yeah.

All the time.

And once they know it presses a button, they just like bring it up whenever they can.

So funny.

So, so funny.

Well, I loved the fact that Selby's parents own a bookshop.

And, you know, to add to that, her siblings loved reading.

And, you know, Selby is portrayed as, you know, someone who's not in love with reading, not in love with her English class, etc.

And so we also learned pretty early on that Selby, the reason Selby doesn't like to read is because words do weird things on the page for her and she loses focus and it's a hard thing for her, which maybe is a type of dyslexia.

I don't know.

And you said that's a little bit autobiographical for you.

Yeah.

When I went to school, not many people were diagnosed with things like that.

My mother taught me to read when I was two.

My mother was a primary school teacher and she taught me like whole word reading.

And so I tend to read left to right and right to left simultaneously.

And so I read slowly and it's like, you know that game, do you have that game Boggle?

It's like everything is a mix up.

So I often read words that aren't there on the page and like I see like sometimes rude words and that makes me giggle.

And so I get distracted easily.

And so, yeah, sometimes so it's weird.

So I actually have excellent comprehension, but I read about 40% slower than most people.

Like when we did exams at school and you'd have a comprehension thing, they'd always say, read the piece twice before you start answering.

I could never do that because I'd never have time, but I still get top marks.

But I could only have only ever had time to read at once because I read slower than people.

And it's like me and my husband, if we sat and read the same book, he would be flicking through the pages much quicker than me.

So I don't know.

I've never been diagnosed with anything, but definitely sometimes I get very muddled by like street signs and things because I'm reading them in different directions at the same time.

Yeah.

Well, I mean, and from my background as an educator before becoming a librarian, I felt this was a really important story arc.

I just thought it was really compelling as we're talking about, you know, someone who's basically traveling into books, but they're not necessarily the best reader, but how important stories were and just what a great message that is for your readers.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I mean, because I've always loved stories and like I got into reading through like audio books and graphic novels and cartoons and comics.

But also, people said to me, because this book is quite short, Hamlet Is Not Ok.

It's 35,000 words.

They say, oh, that's great.

It makes it accessible for people who struggle with reading.

And I thought, well, I don't see that that's so much the problem because I read slowly, but I have read, you know, Dickens and all those great tone kind of books and Gone With The Wind and things.

It just takes longer.

And sometimes when you're reading for school, the idea of having to read like a great big thick book in this amount of time can be overwhelming.

But it doesn't mean you don't enjoy it.

It just it just takes you longer sometimes.

Or it might help if you like listen to an audio book while you're reading it so you don't get off track.

Exactly.

Well, you had a great quote, English teacher speaking here.

So I'd love to pull out the quotes.

Reading is important, but stories are even more important because stories are the patterns that make humans tick.

So I loved that that idea.

I've given that whole idea so much thought because since I started doing my podcast with The Bedtime Stories, yeah, you just realize how so ingrained and important stories are emotionally.

Because apart from me doing the stories myself for the podcast, and you know, they're just silly stories, but they're so important to like make kids laugh and have like the classic arc of, you know, there's a problem and you solve the problem and you live happily ever after.

That's so reassuring to children.

And part of from doing the podcast, I've been doing I've read all Grimm's fairy tales.

I've read Thousand One Arabian Nights.

I've done all this research into some of these stories are so ancient, you know, the stories of Aesop.

You know, if you think he was like a Turkish slave living in Greece 2500 years ago and some of his stories actually come.

They're probably influenced by Indian stories like all his stories about the animals and stuff.

So you think these stories have been going around and around and around the world, traveling all over the world for thousands and thousands of years, because all cultures at the end of the day, before their children go to bed at night, when they're starting to feel frightened and it's dark, they tell stories to comfort each other.

And there's something so emotionally and psychologically important about that.

And I think like obviously literacy is important.

Literacy is so empowering and it's so empowering to disadvantage people.

If they get on top of literacy, it can transform their lives.

But storytelling is also important for a whole bunch of other reasons.

Yeah, I wanted to put that idea, well, kind of in conversation with this very funny scene in the book.

I don't want to give away too much, but...

Just give it away.

Hamlet is berating the bookstore patrons for their book choices.

And it's hilarious.

But, you know, he kind of, you know, what?

This book has no words.

It's all pictures.

You know, this is terrible.

Or the romance novel was the other one that he thought was not even natural.

Yeah, he's telling the lady off for reading romance.

Well, Hamlet is a huge literary snob.

That's one thing that gets me.

Sometimes people say, your character does this and that is bad.

It's like, yeah, they're a bad person.

You know, Hamlet is like this really like, like he's like he's this young art student who's so full of himself and how much he knows and his knowledge and how educated he is.

He's a snob for that sort of stuff.

So, yeah, it makes sense.

I don't personally agree with him.

I am very big on the value of graphic novels.

In fact, the first thing that I picked up that led me to write in this book was a graphic novel of Hamlet and it transformed my perception of Hamlet, the play, because when I saw it as a graphic novel, because when you see the play, the actors, they usually get an older actor to play Hamlet because it's such a complicated part.

So they'll get someone in their 30s.

But Hamlet should be in his 20s.

In my opinion, he should actually be in his earlier 20s.

And so when I saw the graphic novel, he was drawn like what he is, which is a student.

He looked like a student.

All of a sudden I thought, oh, I knew people like that at university who'd done one semester of philosophy, a couple of semesters of literature and thought they knew everything.

And so that's who he is.

He's wonderful and charming and articulate, but he's also naive and wrong about things.

Yeah, I just thought it was so interesting to the dichotomy between those two ideas.

And those genres now, specifically romance and graphic novels, are really gaining more status, you know, as having their alternative ways to tell stories or, you know, stories that help people with certain things.

I've been reading a lot about romance.

Sorry, the thing with graphic novels, people like people who love words, they don't think about how powerful pictures are and the whole thing of visual literacy.

Because for me, I'm super conscious of it.

Because when I do a book and we have to design a cover, I've had to work with, you have to work with obviously illustrators, and illustrators often aren't super good at taking written instructions.

So if you can do a drawing for them to show what you want, they're like, oh yeah, I get what you want.

And I've actually worked with illustrators like for my Peski Kids series, the illustrator was, her name is Erica Salcedo, and she lives in Spain, so Spanish is her first language.

So if someone, their first language is not English, and they're an illustrator, the easiest way to communicate with them is by doing drawings.

And you think drawings and pictures are an international language.

And you think, we don't often think of that in that terms, but it's such a powerful means of communication, because whatever your first language is, or whatever your ability with reading is, pictures are universal, something pretty much everyone can understand.

So yeah, I think people who, the problem is that the people who are the conduits to literature are often people who love words themselves, and they forget that pictures are these amazingly powerful tools of communication that shouldn't be underestimated just because in some ways they are easier.

Yeah, well, there's that old saying, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Yes, and if you're, you know, if you value in the storytelling and the messaging, then, you know, it doesn't matter how you tell it.

Exactly.

Well, this next question, I feel like you've touched on already, but I want to just put it in the form of a question, unless there's something, in case there's something more you want to say about it.

And it's the idea that plays are meant to be seen, as in on stage performed, or read aloud, rather than read silently as one would typically read a novel.

Yeah.

And so we were just curious if you wanted to tell us a little bit more about why you chose to include this message.

I mean, it's obvious that it goes with Shakespeare because that's always a conversation about Shakespeare.

But I felt like there was more to it.

Would you like to talk about that?

Yeah, because obviously you get the nuance of the performer's emotional take on it.

But with Shakespeare, it's so important because a lot of those words, if you see them on the page, they don't look like familiar words.

But when you hear them out loud, you realize, oh, you get the sense of what they mean from the context.

If you hear it out loud like you don't when you read it on the page.

So actually, when I was researching Hamlet, I would have my copy in my lap and I would listen to a radio version.

So there was two versions I listened to.

There was like an old 1960s one by John Gielgud, the famous British actor where he was playing Hamlet.

And then a more recent one by the BBC Radio did a bunch of Shakespeare plays.

And they did a really good one with Michael Sheen playing Hamlet.

And that's fantastic.

So they were the two versions.

I would read the play and be listening at the same time, because the actors would make you, the different actors, because they're very different performances, would make you notice things about the lines that were different.

And then I would watch a bunch of movie versions, but every different actor makes you notice things.

And also hearing them say, as I say, the words sometimes made you understand words you think you thought you didn't know what they meant.

So that's why I think it's so important to see and hear it performed.

Because I know just even with, like I'm a huge Jane Austen fan, and I'm a huge fan for all the audiobooks of Jane Austen.

And I would have listened to *Pride and Prejudice*, probably six different actresses playing *Pride*, reading *Pride and Prejudice*.

And every one of them, I noticed different things in the book.

And I've read it 10 times, but you hear the different actresses using different emphasis, emphases, I guess, and pronunciations.

And it makes you make different connections in your mind and have different ideas about it and process the book in a different way.

So, yeah, these are all the things I was thinking of when I was trying to emphasize to young people, don't just read it, listen to it.

It's really important to at the very least listen to it.

Because I know, like we live in a country town, it can be very hard to see a good production, like a play, but everyone can listen.

These radio and audio book versions, they're available easily to anyone.

Yeah, the reader makes such a big difference to me on the audiobooks.

If I start an audiobook and I don't like the way the reader is reading it, I'll just turn it off.

I'm like, I'm going to read this one the regular way with my eyes.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

But if it's a good one, that can just transform a book.

It becomes a performance.

Yeah, and I mean, I'm such a nerd.

I like to, as I say, I like to, if I really love a book, I like to listen to a bunch of different versions of the same book and just wallow in all the different ideas that you can get from the different readers.

But yeah, we were super lucky in COVID because the National Theatre Live in London, which they do these, they get the very best theatre productions from the West End, like the most expensive government funded theatre productions that cost millions to stage.

And they film them.

And normally, like, you can go and see them at the cinema, at select cinemas.

And we're very lucky in our small town.

Our cinema is like an art house cinema.

And they show these National Theatre Live productions of amazing plays with, like, great actors playing the lead roles.

But during COVID, they played a different National Theatre Live play every week was available for download on the Internet.

So I made my girls watch their version of Midsummer Night's Dream was amazing.

Like, it was fantastic.

It had all this acrobatics with acrobats using silks and stuff.

Like, my youngest one was eight at the time, and she loved it.

But I made them watch Anthony and Cleopatra, too.

And it had like Ralph Fiennes as Anthony.

Oh, wow.

Yeah, we watched Heracles.

We watched a whole bunch of Shakespeare plays because and all front with these best productions from London.

And you can still see them online now, but you have to pay a subscription fee now.

But if you're interested in watching Shakespeare and you're like me, you live in a country town where maybe you don't get access to actual theatres.

That's a good way to expose your kids to top quality productions of Shakespeare plays.

I want to see them myself.

Exactly.

Definitely check out the Midsummer Night's Dream.

Like if you're only going to see one Shakespeare playing your life, that version of that play was fantastic.

All right.

So the next question is about Dan, the tutor.

He was Selby's brother's friend and I loved his character.

He is black and his dad emigrated from Zimbabwe.

So his ethnicity is mentioned several times as the story progresses.

So we just wanted to ask, and you talked a little bit about putting in characters of color and, you know, how you want to do it, but also it can be tricky.

So we were just curious why or how we made that choice and decided to develop his character.

Well, yeah, it would have been a bunch of things.

When I first started writing books, I had read a book about how to write books by an Australian romance author called Emma Darcy.

And she said, try to describe your characters as little as possible so your readers can project themselves onto the characters so they can see themselves in their characters.

And so I've always done that.

I've always had very minimal physical descriptions of characters because I want all my readers to imagine themselves.

And I was successful in that people can't tell what country Nanny Piggins and Friday Mines are set in.

They all think it's set in America because that's something you do in television when you write animation.

It's going to be shown in 30 different countries.

So you write it in a way you can't tell where it's set.

So I always did that.

But then like when Nanny Piggins was illustrated in America, I was shocked that all the illustrations came back.

All the characters were white and they were like, well, you didn't specify.

And I thought I didn't know I had to specify.

I just assumed you would represent the world the way it is.

And I know in Sydney, where I was living at the time, like I lived in a neighborhood that was only 20 percent white.

It was like 40 percent Korean, 40 percent Chinese, a big Sri Lankan community.

So it just was so jarring to me.

I just assumed that's the way people in their heads would fill in the characters.

And then I realized people don't.

And actually, the illustrator was Thai and the editor was Chinese.

So I came to realize, oh, even people of different ethnicities don't see their ethnicity.

And they just they assume it's white too.

And that never occurred to me.

So I started being more conscientious about making sure the names were clearly ethnic, because a lot of older Australians who are ethnically diverse will have very Australian sounding names.

My mom's best friend is Chinese Australian, but her name is Aileen, which is a very Australian name.

So I thought, you've got to make this clearer.

So I started to put in more ethnic names.

And then when I got up to doing this book, there was all the Black Lives Matter stuff.

And I thought, OK, I just got to be super clear.

And I wanted it to definitely represent the type of ethnic diversity I see around me.

And when I'm traveling around Australia, we don't have the same ethnic mix that you have in America.

We never had slavery in Australia like the way you did.

So we didn't when I was growing up have people of African descent.

There were very few in Australia.

But in the last 20 years, we've had a lot of immigrants from Africa.

So they're directly from Africa.

So we have people from South Africa and Zimbabwe and Somalia.

And a lot of times, particularly with refugee programs, when people come to Australia, we take a lot of refugees in Australia.

That's controversial itself.

But they come and part of the initiative is the government encourages them to live in regional Australian areas for the first three years to help populate and stimulate the economy in regional areas.

So when I like as an author, I travel all around the country all the time visiting schools.

So you go to all these small towns and you'll look out at the sea of faces.

And there will be kids who are of African heritage in the group, which is something you didn't see 30 years ago, but the last 10, 20 years you see more and more of.

So I thought, well, I want to reflect that in my book, because there are there are people at my kids school that are from Africa.

And there was I met this amazing guy.

He was actually working on with me and my husband.

We were setting up a business.

He was setting up our bank accounts with us.

And he was from Zimbabwe and his name was actually Wonderful.

That was his first name, Wonderful.

And we had this meeting where he was setting stuff up for us on the computer.

You know, when people like before our podcast today, when I couldn't get my recorder to work and you're just sitting there waiting for me to get my computer to work.

We had a meeting like that went for an hour and a half.

An hour of it would have just been waiting for Wonderful's computer to work.

So we ended up talking all about Zimbabwe and how he got the name Wonderful and how he was embarrassed about it.

Then he came to Australia and everyone was fascinated.

And so he started calling himself Wonderful again.

And so I had Wonderful in my mind when I wrote Dan and the kids that go to my kids' schools.

And I thought, yeah, I want to see that reflected.

These kids, because they come straight from Africa and it's not come through the history of slavery.

They just fit in.

I mean, there are problems, but they fit into our culture differently.

And just it's it's very.

Yeah.

So anyway, I wanted to reflect that.

And I also blended it with my brother's friends.

My brother was a huge Dungeons and Dragons nerd.

Come over to my mom's house and play Dungeons and Dragons every week.

So I sort of blended this idea of an African immigrant with my brother's friends, because he had friends like that that were immigrants from different places.

And they all were just 100 percent nerd.

Where they came from did not matter because they were just DNC nerds.

That was their ethnicity.

We wanted to discuss with you the portrayals of women and people with mental illness in classics like Hamlet.

And we were curious, why did you decide to challenge these portrayals?

I try not to write books that are issue driven, generally speaking.

Like I've written 30 books and there's only a couple of them where I consciously tried to put some of what I'm concerned about in terms of social issues.

And if I had to pick one thing that I'm concerned about in terms of social issues, it's mental health because I'm a comedy writer and comedy writers are dogged with mental health issues.

Like it tends to be part of your brain that makes you be able to see things in this perverse way and write comedy tends to be hand in hand with mental illness.

So I'm a comedy writer, my husband's a comedy writer, lots of our friends are comedy writers and this is a very real thing in our industry is people struggling with mental health issues and struggling to pass the normal in a world where people don't want to know about your mental health issues.

So when I was approaching this, my idea was like in Australia, we have this thing called Are You Ok Day where it's spelled, you know, are you with just the letter U, OK.

And you're supposed to ask your mates, are you OK?

But I know personally from people I know who have genuine mental health problems, they hate Are You OK Day because they find it really confronting because they're trying to pass the normal.

And then if someone says, mate, are you OK?

They think, oh, my God, I'm not passing for normal.

People can tell I'm not OK.

So we're asking them and they're OK, make them think they're not OK.

And that can be very triggering.

They'll spiral.

So I thought I want to if I'm going to deal with Hamlet, where people have serious mental health problems, I want to just provide just one or two slightly more useful tools that if you meet someone who is going through a mental health crisis, maybe some kid who reads this will be able to use one of their tools and help that person just get through the next hour.

So that's why the stuff with Ophelia with, OK, let's get through the next 10 minutes, let's get through the next hour.

That was something I did all this research and it's like, what is mental health first aid if you're dealing with someone who is in severe crisis?

And so these were the techniques I thought that I read about and I thought, OK, I don't want to overload kids with a whole bunch of explanation, but that's an idea you can get your head around of just help this person focus on, you know, you're going you're in a lot of pain in this moment and you think you're not going to get through, but we're just going to get through the next five minutes and then the next 10 minutes and then the next hour.

So I thought that's a tool I can explain to kids in this book and it's maybe something that they might be able to find help for.

I know it's really hard.

Like if someone's in true mental health crisis, it's so hard to help them.

But I thought, OK, hopefully that's a positive I can put in this book.

So that's why I did that.

And I love that it was Selby that knew this stuff and not the older character who read all the books.

Sometimes we can over intellectualize things.

I know with my own kids, my younger daughter has been through a lot, but she's very, very empathetic as a result.

And she sees when people are struggling and she's just kind to people.

Like sometimes people get frustrated with people because oftentimes when people are in mental health crisis, they are unpleasant to be around and they do selfish, horrible things.

And to be able to like realize that you need to be empathetic in that moment when every instinct in your body is like you just want to either get away from them or fight back against this unpleasantness, that's counterintuitive.

And yeah, so anyway, all these things were in my mind.

Yeah, well, I thought it very much added a richness to the story.

And I was very appreciative of it.

Yeah, you've got to be so careful of being cavalier.

You've got to be so careful of portraying suicide at all, because any betrayal can be triggering.

So it can.

Yeah.

So even just us talking about it, like if there is anybody listening, there are so many helplines wherever you are, just Google.

There are lots of people online and phone lines.

Never be afraid to get on a phone line.

I've like late at night, particularly when my kids were little and I was just distressed, I've run helplines, my husband's run helplines.

That's what they're there for.

When you're in your darkest moment and none of your friends or family say anything helpful to you, just ring a helpline.

They can be really, really helpful just getting you through half an hour or an hour, getting you through till morning when it's daylight and things don't seem so bleak.

So yeah, anyway, these messages are important.

And I know you hear it all the time, but sometimes people need to hear it again.

Sometimes they just need to hear it at the right time.

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

It's OK.

It's OK to have a really bad day in everyone.

Like every people are so secretive about this.

Everyone goes through this in their life.

Some people go through it more often and get it worse.

But if you start talking to people about it, you'd be amazed how many people and grown ups will have been through something similar to what you're going through.

But they won't necessarily say something helpful to you or save the right thing to you in that moment.

So sometimes it's best to reach out to someone who's had a bit of training.

Yeah.

Well, thank you for that PSA.

That is extremely powerful.

And we do, by the way, always preface our podcast if there might be something triggering in it.

We always do that as well.

We point that out.

But without revealing anything specific, I just, you know, when I sat down to read *Hamlet Is Not Ok*, it coincided with me going through a very dark period of time just a few weeks ago.

And just reading that message and getting that message from your book really did help me to just feel like I, you know, I could make it.

I could make it through the next 10 minutes.

I could make it through the next hour.

I could make it through the day.

So, you know, you said, well, primarily you're thinking of writing for kids, but that your books are accessible to everyone.

Yeah, your book helped me as an adult.

So thank you for that.

That's wonderful.

That's wonderful.

I'm so pleased.

I love this idea of rewriting characters that got sort of an unfair shake in the original.

And, you know, they make a few changes in *Hamlet*.

And Ophelia kind of gets a little bit of redemption.

What other literary characters' fates would you like to see changed?

I want to ask more about Ophelia.

Like, I went and did a panel visit.

Like, in Australia, there's this Shakespearean theatre company that's very famous.

It's called the Bell Shakespeare Company.

And they asked me to go and do a panel on *Hamlet* for them for the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Shakespeare First Folio.

It was very prestigious.

No one could believe that they invited a crazy children's author like me to go and talk to them.

So they had all these great Shakespearean actors.

They had the head of the whole Shakespeare company there, and they were all talking about Hamlet and the meaning of it.

And then they asked me and this actress about the misogyny in Hamlet because Hamlet is himself quite misogynist.

And I said, Oh, no, Hamlet's just upset because his dad's dead.

I don't have a problem with anything.

Hamlet says he's just very emotional and taking it out on everybody.

I said Shakespeare's greatest act of misogyny is his portrayal of Ophelia because that character makes no sense.

Like from one scene to the next, it's like it's a different person because he's not he's obviously not focusing on her.

He's telling a story about Hamlet and she's just like a placeholder of a girlfriend.

And oh my goodness, everybody else on the panel, their heads like simultaneously exploded.

And they're like, you can't say that.

I had to apologize to them all afterwards.

But I actually think I was right.

I think he just wasn't focusing on Ophelia at all.

Like he's telling a story about Hamlet.

So, yeah, that was in my mind.

And there's this children's production called The Listies.

And they do a version of Hamlet called Hamlet Prince of Skidmarks, which is very unfortunate because it's actually a brilliant children's show.

And they had this whole song for Ophelia, which was like they have it that she goes off to the moon and is trained by a nun and a dinosaur in Kung Fu and then comes back and beats everyone up.

And they've got a song which is Ophelia, trained by a nun and a dinosaur.

Ophelia, not enough line, so we wrote more.

And so that's what I think of with her.

But yeah, I think so much of the canon of Western literature is written by men, particularly with British literature.

It's written by men who went to all boys' private schools and all boys' colleges, and they just don't even, like I was saying, illustrators, it not occurring to them to make ethnically diverse characters.

They just don't even think about their stories from women's perspectives.

And like you think things like *Wind in the Willows*, there's only one woman character in that whole thing, and she's this grumpy washerwoman.

There's so many British men's stories, like even *Peter Pan*, like the way Wendy is the only female character, and she's this ridiculously idealized character who is made to feel responsible for Peter, all Peter's emotional baggage.

You think it is weird, and *Lord of the Rings*, all these men who write these books about only men for children.

It's like it's sowing the seeds of so many of our gender issues today.

Preach on.

Oh, yes.

And now I was reading the other day about, oh, you know, children's literature today, it's all like middle-aged white women.

It's like, yes, but we've been waiting thousands of years for us to have our go.

Let us play with a toy train set that is children's literature.

Yes, please.

Preach on.

I'm going to lighten it up, though.

Your story, Hamlet Is Not Ok, does involve some travel through what you in the book call the space-time fiction continuum on page 126.

Do you want to talk a little bit about how you came up with that concept?

Yeah, well, I watched a lot of Star Trek when I was younger and I was thinking wormhole.

Because originally, I would what my original idea, people always say authors.

Oh, what inspires you?

What are your themes and things like that?

Oftentimes, 90 percent of what is driving us is we just desperately are trying to make some money to keep our family afloat.

So I'm always like because I'm an Australian author, like we don't earn as much as, you know, British and American authors.

So I'm just trying to like eat my house and pay for my my teenagers and my dog, you know, to live a normal life.

So I was I was just like, how can I write a book that sells more?

And I thought I was in the bookstore and I saw this book called The Book Thief and I thought that's genius.

Because people go into bookstores to buy gifts for people and all they know about the person is they like books and they'll think, oh, Aunt Glenda likes books.

There is there's a book called The Book Thief.

It's obviously about books and thieves are interesting.

I'll buy that for Aunt Glenda.

And I thought, I've got to have a book that has the word book in the title.

So I thought, how about and I started thinking book book worm.

And then I started thinking wormhole.

And I thought, I'm going to write a book called Book Worm Wormhole.

And that was the first idea.

And then I started thinking, OK, so you've got a girl in a bookshop and there's a wormhole that she goes through from reading a book.

And that's how that whole idea started.

And then the publisher said, we're not publishing a book called Book Worm Wormhole.

But for ages it was just called the Hamlet book.

Yeah.

But also my husband is really into self-help books.

So I was driving to Sydney thinking about all the self-help book stuff in Hamlet.

And I thought, thinking about I'm OK, you're OK.

And so that's where the title came from.

Ah, it's nice.

It is perfect because, you know, he's really not.

He's really not really not OK.

And I'm so glad.

They want me to do a follow up.

And I want me to do a follow up about Romeo and Juliet.

And I was thinking of calling the Romeo and Juliet one.

Romeo is from Mars.

Juliet is from Venus.

Nice.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

I was just going to make a joke about.

I'm glad you didn't call it Ophelia Is Not OK.

Yes.

Yes.

No, but it's a punchy title.

And people are intrigued by it.

It's amazing how quite young children are really intrigued to find out about Hamlet because they hear about it and they want to know about it.

So kids find that title appealing too, even though they don't know anything about I'm OK, you're OK or anything like that.

Yeah, that's great.

It was a big debate how to spell OK on the cover.

Editors and publishers hate it when you spell OK with the letters OK.

But I pointed out to them, I'm OK, you're OK.

That's how they spell it.

So they buckled and they had it that way.

Good.

Yeah.

And also this is for young people.

That's how they spell OK.

Oh, that's not their attitude.

Publishers and editors, it's like it's for young people and we must bring them over to our train of thought.

Let's not alienate our young people.

Yes.

So, speaking of the space time fiction continuum, one of the interesting bits is what happens to other literature and by extension the world when the book Hamlet changes, when they've changed the story.

And then all the words start draining out of other books that have been influenced by Hamlet.

Because people don't even, again, from when I do my Bedtime Stories podcast, I've learnt so much about stories and how they just keep spiralling around the world.

And you think, yes, Hamlet has influenced so many other authors and influenced so many other texts, but also Hamlet was influenced by a Danish fairy tale.

So it's a long chronology that Hamlet is just one part in this long chronology of storytelling.

And if you take one piece of the puzzle out, it's like a Jenga towel, the whole thing can come tumbling down.

So I'm always trying to encourage people to think of storytelling that way, that they're these powerful things that spiral around from one culture to another all the time all around the world.

Yeah, yeah, for sure, for sure.

Isn't it The Lion King based on Hamlet as well?

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, for sure.

These things are everywhere.

And like kids, like 99.9% of kids who watch The Lion King are not going to realize that.

But so many more people have seen The Lion King, like children would have seen The Lion King than have seen a version of Hamlet.

So all these things are things you can tap into to make these big ideas accessible.

I think so.

Are you more of a plotter or a pantsier when it comes to?

I'm really big on plotting because I'm very, very time poor.

Because as I say, I've got two children and I have to travel a lot because, you know, in Australia, as I say, you don't make a lot of money as an author.

So a lot of authors really heavily subsidize their income by visiting schools and doing paid school visits.

So I am very, very, very time poor.

And I consciously try to spend as much time with my kids as possible.

So I need to use my time as effectively as possible.

So I am a very big plotter.

The first thing I always do when I start writing a book is I get a sheet of cardboard and I like map out the plot of the book.

And I do a big circle.

If you go on my Instagram, you can see I draw, I post pictures of it.

I draw a big circle and I think of it in terms of Joseph Campbell's hero journey.

And I map it out where the characters are going to join in.

And then because of my training in television, I then take that map and I will convert that into like a 10 to 20 page outline where I go through everything that's going to happen in the plot and make sure it all makes sense.

And only then, like that whole process will take about three weeks.

Only then do I start writing the book.

But that means if I start writing and I get say 10,000 words in and then I have to go to a festival for a week and I come back and I was like, where was I?

I can just pick up because the outline will say, OK, the next thing you have to write is this.

And this is the last thing you wrote.

So it makes it a lot easier if you've got a disjointed writing schedule or like, you know, you know how it is with kids, like you're writing, I'm going to get five days right in a row.

And then one of them will like sprain their elbow and it could be broken.

And you've got to take the day off to go and get it x-rayed.

And you just like your mind is completely taken somewhere else.

And then you come back and it's like, where was I?

So if you plot in that way allows me to use my time very efficiently.

Oh, that makes a lot of sense.

But that said, obviously, I have a very stream of consciousness style.

So once all that set up, then it just flows.

And sometimes the characters do take you places you didn't realize you were going to go.

So you're a plotter, but you don't necessarily hold yourself to that.

No.

And sometimes you're going to be flexible too.

And sometimes you'll just get a better idea and then you have to go and you have to go right back to the map and change the map.

Yeah.

Yeah, absolutely.

You also mentioned that your books were mysteries.

So yeah, I think Friday is more important.

Yeah, because you have to when you write a mystery novel, you really want to you have to know the ending before you begin.

Really, you really do.

Otherwise, there's nothing worse than writing a 35,000 words of a 40,000 word book and realizing you don't have an ending.

So usually the first thing you come up with is the ending.

And then you can put all the clues in as subtly as possible throughout the book and with as many red herrings and distractions as possible.

So yeah, you really, really have to plot those types of books.

But then within once you've got a scene and you know, okay, in this scene, this needs to happen and this character needs these these two characters need to move to this point emotionally.

Once you've worked out what has to happen in the scene, then how you make that happen there, you can be creative.

Yeah.

Well, that makes a lot of sense.

Yeah, I'm afraid I am boringly mathematical about the way people listen to me talk, just flow, flow, flow, flow, flow.

And then when people see how I actually do things, they're like kind of almost disappointed because I was very, very trained at an academic school to think very mathematically.

And that does sort of come through into just like the discipline of just going through the process doggedly, even when you don't want to do it because it will make it easier in the long run to just do it in this dogged fashion.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Well, and it just shows you how interrelated English and math are as well.

So everything in the liberal arts is interrelated.

So, yeah, it's all the way your brain works and the way your brain is trained to work.

And I was I was lucky I went to a very, very good school.

Obviously, I wasn't the best student at the good school, but they did teach me to work hard and they taught me to work hard and to just take small, small, small steps.

And like I say this to kids now, when I go to presentations, when you have a goal that is beyond the horizon that you can't see because it's so far away, working doggedly towards it, that's how you get so many great life achievements.

And that's how you get that you can write like 30 books in 16 years.

And like I've run a marathon and I've got a black belt.

And these are all things that you can only achieve by having faith that working very hard at small things every day will get you there.

Awesome.

Yeah.

You're an inspiration.

Kids never want to hear that.

They always want it to be easy.

But it's just it's not how life works.

No, it isn't.

And the earlier they learn it, the better their life is going to be.

So, yeah.

Yeah.

Unfortunately, it's not glamorous.

It's like if you work very hard for 26 years, you will become successful.

Yeah.

It's not glamorous.

But you know, but that's life.

And we've all been here or we're all going through it together.

So we're all.

Yeah.

And the trick to happiness is finding joy in the work.

Yeah.

Yeah.

It's never about the ending anyways.

I get asked a lot, you know, what are the highlights of your career?

And they expect you to say, oh, winning this award or something like that.

It never is.

It's always, you know, the most joyful thing is like when you start to tell a story, particularly the little kids and you see them just like their eyes start to widen as they go with you and they what you're saying becomes increasingly ridiculous, but they don't care.

They want to come with you anyway.

That's the best thing.

It's better than any award, any paycheck, any book deal.

That's the best thing about what I do.

Wow, that just gave me chills.

I'm such a geek, you know, what can I say?

Well, I wanted this.

This is a really important question.

So loving the way the story ended and Dan mentions to Selby, we're going to be working together again, because next you're reading King Lear.

King Lear.

Yeah.

From that ending, I need to know, we need to know, our listeners need to know, are you planning to write a series of Selby and Dan books, or is this really just going to be a standalone?

Well, when I first pitched this, that's me being naughty trying to back my publisher into a corner.

When I first wrote this book, the first iteration was not quite so much about Selby.

It was more a novelization just of Hamlet.

It did have Selby in it, but it wasn't so much her journey.

And the publisher just did not like it.

They did not think a book about Shakespeare would sell.

And they love me.

My books have been really successful in Australia, and they don't want to upset me.

So they had this meeting with me, and they're very kind.

And they're like, Rachel, this book is not going to sell.

We're not going to publish it.

Perhaps you can self-publish.

And I was just like, OK, OK, I get it.

So I just thought, stuff it.

It was COVID.

I had extra time.

I wanted to write this book.

And I knew that my publisher was pregnant, and she was going on maternity leave.

And I knew the woman replacing her was a huge theatre snob.

And so I knew she would be much more favourable to it.

So I went away and I did rewrite it.

I gave all this depth to the Selby story.

And then I pitched it to this person who I knew would love all the Shakespeare stuff.

And that's how I got the book up.

But I never thought it would sell.

I thought it would be like a couple of thousand copies sell.

And it's like good because it's sort of intellectual, makes me look good.

I didn't think people would like commercially get on board with it, but it's just done really well.

It's really caught the imagination of teachers, librarians, my kids, as I said, kids are really intrigued by it and have been enjoying it.

So it's done better than anyone thought.

So I was cheeky when I put that thing about King Lear at the end because I was trying to sort of like set my publisher up to sort of egg them into like giving me another book deal.

But they have come back to me and said they do want another Shakespeare book, but they're kind of keen on me doing Romeo and Juliet next.

And I thought it's a better known play.

It is.

And it's about teenagers.

It's about kids closer to the age group.

And the first thing I'm going to do probably will be to split those, to get those two apart because they're too young, but it will be all exploring.

I thought that would be good to explore teenagers and relationships rocketing ahead before you're ready for them.

So I thought that would be good.

But it's actually interesting just this last week, I was, I was, because I love, there's a good BBC radio version of King Lear.

And I was listening to it because that's another one that I didn't know as well.

So I was listening to it again.

And I just had this great idea about King Lear.

So I, about, because you think it's like Mean Girls, you know, I just seen Mean Girls musical.

And you have three sisters are so like Regina George and Gretchen Weiner and Karen White.

I thought, oh, you could do a really good, like one of these Selby and Dan books with King Lear and going back and like that whole Mean Girls idea of the sisters, the way they treat each other and the way they treat their dad.

And I thought, oh, I can write a book.

Like I've, so I've had the idea now.

So I think, yeah, if I, if they do Romeo and Juliet and that goes well, yeah, I think I will do King Lear after that.

Cool.

Love it.

I've got to write, I've got, I'm writing a Nanny Piggins books now, and then I've got to write a Friday Bonds book, and then I've got to write a collection of Greek stories, and then I'm going to write that book.

It's just a couple of years down the road.

Yeah.

Yeah.

I've just got a four-book deal that will take me through the next two and a half years.

That's awesome.

Well, I think that just about wraps things up.

Mm-hmm.

So would you like to tell our listeners where they can find you online?

Well, my website is raspratt.com, and you can get links to all my things there, like I'm on Instagram and Facebook.

And if you want to check out my podcast, if you haven't had enough of the sound of my voice, my podcast is called Bedtime Stories with RA.

Spratt, and you can get that anywhere you get podcasts.

And it's just literally like I tell Greek myths, I tell fairy tales.

They're usually told from the point of view of Nanny Piggins, my fictional pig character, and they're silly and fun.

So if you want to listen to something silly and fun when we drive around in the car, that's the type of podcast it is.

That sounds fantastic.

Rachel, this has been an absolute pleasure.

As often happens when we do interviews with authors, we get off the call and we think, oh my God, I want more.

I think we could be friends.

We could have tea together.

I feel like that too.

I want to come and visit you.

I enjoy this so much more than sitting writing.

I could talk for another couple of hours.

I just love talking and telling stories.

So few people are interested in what I do.

For years, no one was interested or wanted to hear me talk about it.

And then finally, after years, you get a bit successful.

And then now podcasts are around and people actually ring me up and ask me about things.

And I'm like, I'm delighted to talk about all these things to other people who are interested in them too.

Yeah, absolutely.

And my family is so grateful that they don't have to talk to me about these things because they're not interested.

Well, they just take you for granted.

But if you weren't there, they'd miss you.

Well, I read this book, this Friday Barnes book, where there was this whole thing set in the sewers of Paris.

And my children are like, oh my goodness, that two weeks where you're obsessed with the sewers of Paris, I would not shut up about it.

It really has been such a pleasure.

And we are so excited for March 12th with the US publication of *Hamlet Is Not Ok*.

All right.

Thank you so much.

Have a great night.

We had so much fun talking with RA.

Spratt.

You can find Rachel's website and social media links in the show notes.

As always, we would love to hear your questions and comments.

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Finally, we just want to say thank you for reading with us because books are meant to be read.