

ONE MORE PAGE - EPISODE 50 - #OWNVOICES - Transcription

Kate:

Hi guys, and welcome to One More Page, a podcast for lovers of kids books. Each month, we delve into the world of picture books, junior fiction and middle grade.

Liz:

The podcast features reviews, news, interviews, and book chat. And in Kids Capers, we get the kids involved in all the bookish fun.

Nat:

So whether you read kids' books, buy them, share them, write them or even eat them, this is the podcast for you. So, let's meet your hosts!

Kate:

I'm Kate, and an Own Voices book I'm keen to read is You Must be Layla by Yassmin Abdel-Mageid, published by Penguin Random House.

Liz:

I'm Liz, and my next own voices read is Living on Stolen Land by Ambelin Kwaymullina published by Magabala Books.

Nat:

And I'm Nat, and my next own voices read is Ugly (for younger readers) by Robert Hodge published by Hachette.

All:

and this is...ONE MORE PAGE!

Nat:

So you guys, I don't know if anybody's noticed, but this is actually Episode 50 of One More Page, can you believe it?

Kate:

Wow, big shout out to us, hey?

Nat:

Huge shout out to us.

Kate:

Have you got some kind of celebratory, "Look what we made," sound effect you can chuck in here in honor of the day?

Nat:

Sure. [Fart sound].

Nat:

Were you after something a bit more celebratory?

Kate:

I was thinking something a little bit more celebratory, but anyway.

Nat:

Okay, hang on. I got one, here you go. How about this? [Sound of clapping and cheering]?

Kate:

Ah, there you go. Happy 50th to us, group hug guys?

Liz:

Oh, I'm pretty sure that's not allowed right at the moment, Kate.

Kate:

Oh yeah. A good point. Well, at least we have some awesome interviews to celebrate with, right?

Liz:

That's right, we do. This episode of One More Page, we're celebrating the OwnVoice's movement and we've invited three amazing authors onto the show to talk to us about their writing. The Australian OwnVoices movement has a lot of wonderful creators in the YA space, as well as kids. So for something a little bit different this episode, we'll be featuring some interviews focusing on older reads, as well as our usual younger ones.

Nat:

For those of you who aren't familiar with the OwnVoices movement, it started about five years ago on Twitter with the idea of shining a light on diverse authors writing about characters who share their identities. It's a way of promoting books written by members of the community they describe and a way hopefully to help open doors to more and more writers from minority communities that maybe haven't always been well-represented in the past.

Kate:

So we are super duper excited today to invite not just one but three amazing kids and YA authors on the show to showcase some of the amazing talent that we have in the OwnVoices community here in Australia. And frankly just in the Australian kidlit community outright.

Liz:

That's right. Standby because today we are speaking to middle grade author, Remy Lai, author of critically acclaimed books *Pie in the Sky* and *Fly on the Wall*; artist, writer and deaf activist Asphyxia, author of middle grade series *The Grimstones* and upcoming YA novel *Future Girl*; and award winning YA author, Alison Evans, author of *Ida*, *Highway Bodies* and *Euphoria Kids*.

Nat:

Seriously, we challenge you to fit more five star good read ratings onto a single podcast. I'm pretty sure it cannot be done.

Kate:

No, I'm pretty sure it can't. First up, we have Liz's interview with Remy Lai. Take it away, Liz.

Liz:

Remy Lai studied fine arts, with a major in painting and drawing. She was born in Indonesia, grew up in Singapore, and currently lives in Brisbane, Australia, where she writes and draws stories for kids with her two dogs by her side. She is the author of the *Pie in the Sky* and *Fly on the Wall*, with more books on the way.

Liz:

Hi Remy, thank you so much for joining us today on One More Page.

Remy:

Hi Liz, thanks for having me here.

Liz:

So your first kids' book *Pie in the Sky* has been a huge success with amazing reviews and lots of awards, and it all seemed to kick off with publication in the US. So I'd love it if you could tell us a bit more about your start in creating kids' books and your journey to publication.

Remy:

So I've been writing and drawing books for kids for quite some time. But obviously the path to publication has been pretty long. So I started out with sending publications to Australian publications when they have open submissions and stuff, but I just didn't get any response back, so like, I didn't know if they were reading them and not liking them. Or ... I got kind of frustrated because I wanted some kind of response, even if it was a rejection. So then I kind of went, I mean I guess I understand why sometimes they can't give a response because they must have, like, I don't know, a million submissions. But in any case, I then went looking to submit to US publishers. But of course, most of them would need agents so then I looked into querying agents, and I queried quite a number of agents with many different manuscripts over the years, to rejections all around. But then I did Pitch Wars in 2017. I don't know if ... are you familiar with Pitch Wars?

Liz:

I have heard about it, and I think, if I'm correct, I'm pretty sure that the Australian author Astrid Scholte, I think she might have got her start with Pitch Wars as well. So yeah, I've seen it on Twitter.

Remy:

Yeah, so It's kind of like where you submit your manuscripts and then they have mentors who kind of guide you through the revision process and then at the end of it then agents can look at your, what your manuscript is about and if they like it they can request it and whatever. Yeah, so I did that because I wanted ... I did it actually because when I first did that, I didn't even really know what it was about because I wasn't on social media a lot. Actually I'm still not on social media a lot. Yeah and then I knew about the mentor thing and that they would give you editorial notes and that was what I wanted for my manuscripts. Because I knew that it needed a lot of work but I just didn't know where to start. So I took part in that and I got great mentors and they gave me great editorial notes. And I did a huge revision and then from there I got my agent.

Liz:

Wonderful, and from there published in the US and now I believe in Australia as well, right?

Remy:

Yes, so my agent is obviously a US agent, yeah.

Liz:

Excellent, oh that's huge and very, very exciting. So I'm really intrigued about the format of Pie in the Sky. So I've seen it described as a hybrid graphic novel and some people call it illustrated middle grade. So I'd love to hear your take on it and also to find out what drew you to this style of story telling?

Remy:

I think my publisher has been calling it like a hybrid book, so a graphic novel prose hybrid. When I first wrote *Pie in the Sky* I actually wrote it as a full graphic novel. But then when I started drawing up the sample pages I realised that it wasn't working because the main character doesn't speak English. You get to know him a lot by his thoughts. And I didn't want a graphic novel with a lot of thought balloons, because that doesn't look good. And then, so I converted the manuscript to a prose novel, and then I realised I kind of missed the images because the images also work in conveying how he can't really communicate. So I decided maybe we can have the best of both worlds by combining them both. Yeah.

Liz:

That's so cool.

Remy:

So there's a lot of revision there.

Liz:

Oh, that just sounds like an incredible amount of work.

Remy:

Yeah.

Liz:

Oh my gosh. But it does work really well having this style and having the little kind of graphic novel comic strip style stuff mixed throughout the prose. I love it.

Remy:

Yeah.

Liz:

It adds so much.

Remy:

Yeah, I think it works for this story. I kind of feel like I love doing this format, but I think that there needs to be a reason why you're using this format, in a way.

Liz:

Yeah. So in Pie in the Sky the main character Jingwen moves to Australia and first it's like landing on Mars. Can you tell me the story behind this story and if there's any personal experiences you've drawn on?

Remy:

I first got the idea for this book, I can't remember what year it was, maybe 2015 or 2016, I can't remember. But I had this ... so I tend to think very visually, so I had this image of these two brothers secretly baking cakes but I couldn't figure out what their story was, I couldn't figure out why they were secretly baking cakes. And I think a year or two later I realised, hey they can't speak English. And then that ... from there, the story clicked into place. And I borrowed very heavily from my own childhood because I only learned English when I was about nine years old. So, a lot of the boys' experience about not being able to communicate and no one understanding them was also from my own experience when I was learning English.

Liz:

Amazing.

Remy:

And also other parts of the book were borrowed from my own life. For example at the end, Jingwen left his younger brother Yanghao behind at the bus station. So that did happen to me too.

Liz:

Oh my gosh! Hang on, were you the older sibling?

Remy:

No I was the younger, I was the younger.

Liz:

Oh my gosh!

Remy:

Yeah, so I have four siblings and I'm in the middle. I think I was about eleven then and my older sister, she must have been about fourteen. We must have had I don't know, a fight or something, I can't even remember. And then she left me behind at the bus station. And I ended up at the police station.

Liz:

Oh my god, was that in Australia?

Remy:

Ah no, that was in Singapore, yeah.

Liz:

Oh right, oh my gosh, she must've been in so much trouble.

Remy:

Yeah, she was in a lot of trouble.

Liz:

Well that's a pretty was a momentous occasion in your childhood and I can see how it would make it into a book cos it's pretty unforgettable.

Remy:

Yeah. I remember during the revision when I was revising this with my Pitch Wars mentors they were questioning whether it was believable that an older sibling would leave behind a younger sibling at the bus station. And I said, yeeees! But then I could see where they were coming from because in that draft, I guess it wasn't believable that ... because Jingwen had been such a good brother. And then it wasn't believable.

Liz:

Like, it wasn't in his character kind of thing.

Remy:

Yeah, in that draft, yeah. But I wanted to make that ending work because that was the ending that I always had in mind. So I went back and laid down all the steps to make it believable.

Liz:

Yeah, just so you could keep that moment.

Remy:

Yeah.

Liz:

Oh that's good. So there is such a growing awareness now around the importance of all kids' being able to see themselves reflected in the books they read. I'd love to know the response you have had to Pie in the Sky and if any young readers have let you know that they've felt this way about it?

Remy:

Yes, so I've had the chance to meet some students who don't speak English at home or they just migrate to Australia or the US or something, and then they have to learn English. And so I've met those kids and they would say that what Jingwen experiences in the book is close to what they're experiencing. So I think that yeah, that's really important. I got to meet a group of kids who English as a second language when I was in a school tour in the US. I wasn't actually supposed to meet them, but then because there was bushfires in California, the original school that I was supposed to go to was closed. So then I got to meet this other group of kids who have English as a second language. And yeah, some of them have only been in the US for a month or something.

Liz:

Oh, wow.

Remy:

Yeah, so that was really special. I think it's important for them to know that someone else has been through it and they came out pretty okay, yeah.

Liz:

Yeah, exactly. And that you know, you can be a successful author and illustrator, which is huge!

Remy:

Yeah and those kids, actually their teachers were really great. So they baked the rainbow cake from the book.

Liz:

Oh, that's awesome.

Remy:

Yeah, so that was really great, yeah.

Liz:

Actually, speaking of that rainbow cake, I was reading the recipe and I can't believe it's got 14 eggs in it. I'm shocked!

Remy:

I know! I regret ... I should have halved that recipe!

Liz:

Oh, it must be a massive cake.

Remy:

It is a massive cake. So now whenever someone asks, I say please halve the recipe.

Liz:

Cool. I really want to make it, I've never made a rainbow cake before.

Remy:

I guess I come from a big family so I think 14 eggs is not a big deal.

Liz:

Oh, that's so fun! And I'd also really love to know some of your writing and illustrating influences, so some favourite creators, and any particular books that you think our listeners should seek out?

Remy:

I think one is definitely *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan.

Liz:

Yes.

Remy:

I read it a long time ago and definitely think it influenced *Pie in the Sky*. And then when I was a kid I read lots and lots of comic books, really. And I think I only read prose books from nine years old onwards. I think before that I never read prose books. So my favourite comic books would be like, *Bone* by Jeff Smith, that one is pretty old. I also read a lot of *Uncle Scrooge* comics then *Calvin and Hobbes* comics. And a lot of mangas, actually.

Liz:

Oh cool. And how about now, do you have any favourite current authors that maybe our listeners might not have heard about that should get a bit of attention?

Remy:

Yes, so I've been lucky to get a lot of advance copies. So this one is quite new. I guess everybody knows Gene Yang? So I read *Dragon Hoops*, that's his latest graphic novel and I really like that. And there's a book by Christina Soontornvat who is an American author. It's called *A Wish in the Dark*, it's a middle grade fantasy and I've been wanting to read that one too.

Liz:

Okay, awesome. Alright, well we'll pop links to those in our shownotes so our readers can seek them out as well. So I understand you've got some other amazing sounding new books coming out like Fly on the Wall, which I believe is coming out soon. And then some other projects in the works like, I read that you've got something coming out called Pawcasso. I just love that name, that sounds awesome. Is there anything you can share about these upcoming books and any other projects that you're working on at the moment?

Remy:

Yeah, so Fly on the Wall which is my second one comes out in September this year, and it is a very similar format to Pie in the Sky in that it's a hybrid book. And it's about this boy, he's 12 years old but his family treats him like a baby. So what he does is he goes on an international flight on his own from Perth to Singapore to prove to his parents and to his family that he's not a baby anymore. So when he goes on this flight, nobody actually knows that he's on this flight.

Liz:

Wow, that's such a cool premise for a story.

Remy:

Yeah, so I actually got the inspiration from the news, because I think actually, I think it was from Sydney ... I think the boy actually flew from Sydney to Bali.

Liz:

Oh my gosh.

Remy:

Yeah, but the news article didn't say why he did it or what happened, so I ... Yeah. But it was a great starting point for the story.

Liz:

Yeah, for sure.

Remy:

And for Pawcasso, this one has been really really really fun to create. So Pawcasso is about this dog who actually carries a basket in his mouth and he goes on his own to like the shopping centre and stuff to do the grocery shopping for his family.

Liz:

Oh how cute! This is a graphic novel or is this also the hybrid?

Remy:

So this will be my first middle grade full graphic novel.

Liz:

Oh, okay.

Remy:

Yeah, it's a lot. There was a lot of drawing involved in that one. This one actually came about because so, I was trying to think of what to do for the third book and then my US editor, he saw my Instagram and a lot of dog books on my Instagram. And he said, maybe you should write a dog book. And that's how it came about.

Liz:

Oh fantastic. Yeah, it's amazing how many people seem to get published – well, illustrators and graphic novelists – through Instagram. It just keeps coming up again and again of editors finding people on Instagram. So it's a pretty massive thing isn't it?

Remy:

Yeah, I think for me like, I'm not on social media a lot, but I do post pictures of my dogs. So yeah, so that's a good way for like, my editor to find out more about me I guess, yeah, just like give me suggestions on topics that I could write.

Liz:

Yeah, great idea. And so when are these coming out, and are they coming out simultaneously in the US and Australia?

Remy:

I think with Fly on the Wall they're simultaneously. For Pawcasso I'm not sure yet, Pawcasso will be next year.

Liz:

Okay.

Remy:

And then in 2022 I actually have a series of young reader graphic novels coming out. There are three books in that. So that's with the same publisher, with the same editor. So that one is also really fun. The first one is about a young elephant named Bima who actually ... he swam from an island, he swam across the ocean to another island when he lost his home due to deforestation. So, yeah, that one is really fun to do.

Liz:

Oh, that sounds amazing. Is that set in a particular country?

Remy:

Yes. So, it is actually based on a true story but I kind of tweaked it so it wasn't actually a true story, but it was inspired by a true story. The elephants were from Malaysia and then they swam to an island in Singapore, one of the little islands in Singapore, yeah.

Liz:

Oh wow, well I definitely can't wait for that. That sounds brilliant. And congratulations on all of these books. So where is the best place for our listeners to keep up with you and your book news online?

Remy:

I think maybe my website. I try to update it. But I'm mostly on Instagram, sometimes I'm on Twitter, but rarely.

Liz:

And what was your website address?

Remy:

Remylai.com

Liz:

Ok, wonderful. Well we'll pop that in our shownotes so everyone can find out more about your books and keep an eye on when all these new releases are coming out.

Remy:

Yeah!

Liz:

So congratulations on all of the books and all of the success, and thank you so much for chatting with us today.

Remy:

Thanks for having me.

Kate:

That was such a great chat, Liz. It's so interesting isn't it that Remy really got her break in the U S first, rather than in Australia. And Pie in the Sky has been such a hit over there, hasn't it?

Liz:

Yeah it really has just won so many awards and you know all those review sites like Kirkus and everything that do the starred reviews. And apparently it's a really big deal to get a starred review. She's got a bunch of those from all of those prestigious review sites. So yeah, it's just doing really, really well.

Nat:

That's awesome. Good on her. I also like that she has a sibling that left her at the bus stop. Cause that sounds like something I can really identify with. I can totally imagine my brother doing that to me.

Liz:

Oh really? I thought you were going to say you're doing it to somebody else.

Nat:

I can imagine that too. I can imagine me doing that to someone else's kid and just forgetting about them but because I only have an older sibling and he was way meaner than I was. I can imagine him doing it to me as well.

Liz:

Oh no. No wonder you write about pranks.

Nat:

Well, one time he was left outside to look after the pram with me in it. And he just looked around and then pushed the pram down a hill. He thought he would just get rid of me. But I survived and came back to haunt him.

Kate:

My mum left me behind at a library one time, which I've never let her forget, but it hasn't dented my love of libraries, so that's good.

Liz:

Well, it's a perfect place to leave you really.

Nat:

No, that sounds awesome.

Kate:

Except when it's closing and the staff are giving you these looks, who the hell are you and where is your parent?

Nat:

Small child go home.

Kate: Yeah.

Liz: All right. So let's find out what everyone's been reading lately. Kate, how about you?

Kate:

Ah, well, I have been reading Peta Lyre's *Rating Normal*, which is an awesome OwnVoices YA novel by neurodivergent author, Anna Whateley. Peta, the main character, is an autistic girl with ADHD who's struggling to manage day-to-day teenage life and to achieve an approximation of normal quote - unquote. The problem is that the day-to-day world is just not at all suited to the way that Peta's mind works.

So a therapist sets her rules to help her fit in, but it all comes with an immense effort. And in a lot of cases, it doesn't quite work anyway. She's got a loving aunt and a best friend Jeb, but the truth is they have problems of their own. When new girl, Sam, starts at school, romance begins to blossom, but the school ski trip brings it all crashing down again. Can Peta keep trying to be normal and does she even want to be? So I absolutely loved this book. The protagonist really just sucks you into your world and has you rooting for her the whole way along. I'm not going to lie, there were definitely tears shed before the end. I think plenty of teenagers will relate incredibly strongly to what Peta's going through, struggling with friendships, with romance, with home life, all of those things.

But of course at the same time, the book is designed to open people's eyes to the experiences of neurodiverse people in a world that's designed for neuro-typical people. I guess at the end of the day, that's the real strength of the entire OwnVoices movement, isn't it. You're introduced to people from minority groups, who the world doesn't accommodate in the same way necessarily that it accommodates white, straight cis able bodied people. The fact that you read about these people and you realize how much like you they are, but how much more they have to just wade through every day in a lot of cases. It's just harder, just the little things that make it more difficult. And so, I just thought this was absolutely brilliant. It's a debut and it's so impressive as a debut book. I think there is more coming where that came from.

I will say though, this is probably at the middle range of YA, there's some romance and maybe a little bit starts happening. So I would put this probably at the 14 plus type age group for those who are interested. But yeah, fantastic read, absolutely loved it.

Nat:

Yeah. It's so great too, because we talk a lot about how reading helps develop empathy and surely there's no better example of a text that promotes empathy than stories written by people with that exact lived experience. I think as a reader, you can't really get a more intimate connection to, or understanding of something you haven't experienced than reading an OwnVoices story. Which is essentially what makes them so powerful and crucial, especially to kid lit.

Liz:

Yeah, for sure. It's so important.

Kate:

It also helps you realize the ways that your behavior could really help somebody out. If you just made a subtle change in this way or that way, you could be helping people out in a way you didn't realize that there was a problem there, but actually you might see yourself reflected in that neuro-typical world, for example, and be like, Oh God is that behavior from me causing problems to other people in my life?

Nat:

Absolutely and that can often be through sheer ignorance or being unaware as opposed to like malicious intent or indifference. And like you said, these books can act as a real mirror to us. Forcing us to acknowledge behaviors and presumptions that are totally out of whack with what's actually going on with people and in the world.

Kate:

Yeah, exactly.

Nat:

All right. Well, Liz, I think you're up. What have you been reading?

Liz:

Well, I have just been reading an amazing new picture book just out with Magabala Books called, Found. So this is the first picture book written by Young Dark Emu Author, Bruce Pascoe, and the illustrations are by Charmaine Leaden-Lewis. And she was the winner of the Keston Indigenous Illustrator award. So this is a really prestigious illustration award that's run every two years by publishers, Magbala Books, which identifies new talent and the opportunity for the winner to actually illustrate a book that they will publish. Charmaine is a Blue Mountains based artist and a descendant of the Bundjalung people plus an advocate for members of the stolen generation.

So the story in Found, reflects the plight of the stolen generation in a way for very young readers to understand. So it's all about a little calf that's been taken from its parents. The short straightforward sentences have really major impact. So sentences like, the man had stolen my mother. So there's just so much feeling there and there's so much suspense at the plight of the calf. But I have to say, it's done in a way that's a really comforting read. Although it offers enough conflict for little readers to ask questions about what's going on or what's going to happen to the calf? It has a softer kind of touch in that the story does come full circle and perhaps isn't always reflective of what happened to the stolen generations. But in this story, it's a way to raise questions and to learn about the stolen generations without necessarily disturbing, really little preschool aged kids.

So the story by using a calf, I think it works really, really effectively. So Charmaine's illustrations are just absolutely amazing in this book. They play with perspective really well, and there's just so much movement and emotion. There's a lot of feeling, just in the calf's eyes alone, and the textures are so clever too. I don't know if you guys have seen, but some of the images of the calf's eyes and nose, it's like, they almost look glossy. I just have no idea how this has been done, it just blows my mind. It's amazing, you have to check this out. And the colors used in the book are these rich rusty reds, especially on the cover to reflect the Australian landscape. And there are just so many details to absorb. It's a beautiful, beautiful book and hard to believe it's actually a debut picture book for both creators actually. So I think there'll be many more from this pairing to come.

Nat:

Yeah, it is really beautiful and Charmaine is just... we all know Bruce's a genius. But Charmaine, this newcomer, her illustrations are just mind blowing. And I think, what you said before about... I don't think it's too much of a spoiler, to let people know that the calf is reunited with its mother. And I think what you were saying before, it's just, obviously that didn't happen. But for this story, I think what it shows is, that's all that needs to happen. It's about being returned to your family and your people and that sense of belonging and being found and being where you belong. And I think that's a really strong message for the kids to talk about as well.

Liz:

Yeah, definitely. I think that the word *belonging* is the ultimate word in this book, isn't it? It's such an important topic and such a huge topic, but this just covers it in a way to make it really, really understandable.

Nat:

Yeah and being with your people, being home, being with family, it's so important and so strong.

Liz:

Yeah. So how about you Nat? What have you been reading?

Nat:

Well, I've actually just finished reading *My Shadow is Pink* by Scott Stuart and published by Larrikin House. Now, if you think you've heard the name Scott Stuart before, it's because he pretty much blew up the internet and blew up Tiktok with this gorgeous video he made of his son attending the premier of *Frozen 2*, I think it was, dressed as Elsa, and not to be out done, Scott found himself the biggest Elsa costume he could find to make sure he was dressed appropriately to accompany his son to the big event.

And even in the video stage, Scott shows his page turn surprise skills because in the video he explains, my son wanted to go dressed as Elsa. I said, "There's no way you're doing that, dot, dot, dot, alone." And then it cuts to a shot of both of them dressed as Elsa as they skip out the doorway. And now Scott is coming at us with his picture book inspired by his son called, *My Shadow is Pink*. It's about a boy who comes from a family with a long history of blue shadows and yet his is a beautiful pink. It's about love and acceptance and being proud of who you are and enjoying the things that you love, even if it doesn't seem to match those around you. And it's really, really, really well done. I was a bit worried that the story might accidentally kind of play into the stereotypes by trying to show you you could be outside of them.

I think what I like about it is, it just really calls a spade, a spade. So instead of pretending that those stereotypes don't exist, it totally calls them out and then fights against them. I really loved it, to me it read as, don't pretend that boy and girl things don't exist in society. We see it every day and in marketing, we see it in the book industry, people talk all the time about boy books and girl books and how we have to stop doing that. But I think instead this book's really encouraging people to not be a part of it. So they're recognizing it's there, but saying don't buy into it. So yeah, I think it's a really good discussion starter for young kids, to break them out of those kinds of stereotypical ideas that are really hard to avoid just growing up in the world we grow up in.

So Bravo Scott Stuart, and also a big shout out to Larrikin House who is relatively new, but a very exciting publisher on the scene. I've been following them very closely from the beginning and I just love the look of what's coming out of this cheeky little publisher. It's all very up my alley, including a book from none other than our very own Liz. Who just did a cover reveal of her upcoming Larrikin House picture book, *Walking Your Human*. Which has some of my favorite dog illustrations ever. I am obsessed with your cover, Liz. You must be so excited.

Liz:

Oh, thanks. Yeah. I'm really excited. So huge shout out to the illustrator Gabriella Petruso. So she's actually based in the UK, but she's an amazing illustrator I've been paired with for this book. So yeah, I'm thrilled with how it looks. It's really, really cool. So I just have to wait a bit longer though because the book's due out probably around February next year now. So-

Nat:

Oh, that's so far away.

Liz:

I know! But also bring on 2021 for so many reasons right?

Nat:

So many reasons.

Kate:

So many.

So Nat, is this book a funny book? Cause I had the impression that Larrikin really have a strong emphasis on funny, but the description didn't necessarily make it sound that way.

Nat:

It is funny but I think Larrikin... yeah, they have an emphasis on funny, but I think they have a little emphasis of left of the middle. I think that's their thing. So it's not just funny. I think it's naughty and cheeky and quirky and there's a bit more of a catch-all when it comes to what they do. Though I would say it's quite... it's beautiful and it's tender, but it's also a bit funny. Yeah, for sure.

Liz:

Yeah, cool. All right, well now it is time for Nat's interview with Asphyxia. Nat, you were just so excited when you finished this interview with Asphyxia. I don't think I've seen you so hyped up since you interviewed Paul Jennings.

Nat:

It's so true. I had just such a blast talking to her. We really hit it off and I feel like we could have talked for hours and well, we almost did. But before we launch into the interview, just for our listeners out there, Asphyxia is deaf and she uses Auslan, so Australian Sign Language, to communicate. So the voice that you'll be hearing is actually that of her gorgeous interpreter Ilana. And for anybody interested in a transcript of this episode, it's going to be available in the show notes on our website.

We would love to do this for every episode, but unfortunately transcriptions are very expensive and this podcast is a zero money making venture. But it was really important for us to make sure this episode in particular was available to the deaf community. So yeah, really excited about this interview.

Kate:

I am too. Let's listen to it.

Nat:

Asphyxia is an artist, writer and public speaker. Author of *The Grimstones* and passionate about art journaling and sustainable living, Asphyxia is also a Deaf activist, sharing details of Deaf experience and raising awareness of the oppression of Deaf. Her new book, *Future Girl*, combines these passions.

Nat:

Hi Asphyxia! Thanks so much for coming on the show.

Asphyxia:

That is my pleasure. Ownvoices is a topic I am passionate about and I'm delighted you are talking about this with your audience.

Nat:

Same here! I've been getting all giddy about this episode because it's something I'm super passionate about too. We have SO much in common.

Asphyxia:

We do! It has been an amazing thing to get to know you to the extent that I have since doing the sensitivity read on *The Art Of Positive Pranking* - which I thoroughly enjoyed, by the way!

Nat:

That's right so let's explain to the audience a little bit about how we first got in touch. As some of you may know my book *The Power Of Positive Pranking* has some Deaf and HOH characters and I enlisted Asphyxia's awesome skills to do a sensitivity read on my book. Then she also signed a part of my megastar author mashup reading of the first chapter and then I was lucky enough to get a preview read of her new book. And then we became email-buddies! Now we've discovered that we have quite a bit in common dont we?

Asphyxia:

Absolutely. I am in awe of your quirky style, the brilliant idea to do the mash up, and the fantastic messages/politics that underlie the lightheartedness of your book. I hope I will learn from you how to do the same fantastic job in terms of getting *Future Girl* out there. It's been an amazing collaboration so far and hopefully the first of many.

Nat:

Aw what a mutual admiration society and giant love-fest this is! So let's talk a little bit about you now! I'm super excited to chat to you today because I feel like this is yet another step towards taking our email-based friendship into the real world. Now I know enough about your background to get very excited about the prospect of us talking trapeze and puppets but for the audience out there who may not know your story, can you tell us a little about your background and your journey to publication?

Asphyxia:

Yep, absolutely... As a child I was passionate about ballet, dancing for around 18 hours a week on top of my schooling in my teens. But my Deafness meant I could not go professional. In my twenties I found circus classes and was drawn to the circus as rather than focusing on conformity, the way ballet does, they celebrate the freak! I became a circus performer and worked freelance for the next ten years.

I was on tour in Guatemala when on the street I saw a dreadlocked man, Sergio Barrios, performing with marionettes. I was captivated, for despite the rough appearance of his puppets, they were so expressive that they seemed to be alive. After the show, I stayed, and begged Sergio to share his skills with me. Lucky for me, he did, and I became a puppeteer.

The first puppet I made was Bronwyn, and she looked just like me. Performing with Bronwyn was like playing with dolls, which it seems I've never entirely grown out of! I decided puppetry would be my way forward. I knew I had to make another puppet show, for the larger stages I perform on, and I began with a vision of a gothic family with big expressive eyes: a mother, a daughter and a grandfather. The Grimstone family and their quirky world unfolded from there.

Someone from Allen & Unwin saw the show, and we received a call asking if The Grimstones could become a book. Of course I was thrilled by this idea, and dived into writing. I was amazed when the publishers said they wanted to turn it into a series! In the end I wrote four books in that series.

I was also involved in illustrating them, working with my friend Jenine Davidson who turned my simple drawings into fabulous layouts. As the series progressed I became more and more confident in my skills as an artist, much encouraged by Jenine, and by the 4th book you can see much more sophisticated portraits!

Nat:

Wow! Seriously every time I talk to you I find another 'in common' When I was a kid, we went to Mexico and I saw a marionette shop and begged my parents to let me spend my 'holiday money' on one. I bought a creepy Big Bad Wolf one and then stood beside a busker for hours dancing my marionette to his music and makey \$. Which I of course then gave back to the busker because I was that kind of kid. I am OBSESSED with puppetry. Love it so much. Having been a trapeze artist myself, I know we use a lot of Audio cues for things. Did that cause any hurdles for you like in ballet or did you find 'circus people' more willing to adapt their ways of teaching/communicating?

Asphyxia:

Wow that is absolutely amazing about the marionettes - they are truly addictive aren't they? And now my jaw is dropping as I didn't know you were a trapeze artist! What kind of trapeze did you do?

Nat:

Oh I did flying trapeze and ariel arts and all kinds of stuff.

Asphyxia:

Wow that's amazing. You are right, audio cues are the usual way of teaching but this wasn't really an issue for me. I found if I watched experienced people I could quickly learn the correct timing for certain moves, so it didn't matter that I couldn't hear the teacher. Also I'd do a move and the teacher would say afterwards that I was early, so I'd adjust and then do the move a bit later next time. Ultimately it meant that I learnt to know internally the correct timing for moves rather than being depending on a shout from the teacher, which many of the other students were. So really I learnt faster that way.

Some people are willing to adapt their ways of teaching and communicating but I have learnt sadly that many are not. Sometimes I can learn from them anyway, especially if there is a student willing to bridge the gap, and other times I just need to find a different teacher.

Nat:

Absolutely! I remember when I taught flying trapeze (which is up very high and usually relies on the instructor pulling the safety lines to call out instructions) we had a Deaf couple who wanted to try and a colleague was like 'oh sorry you need to be able to hear the instructions we give'. I stepped in and with my little bit of sign language and brainstorming alternatives methods, we were not only able to figure out a way to do it but even got them both to do the catch. I was so stoked to catch them and they were so excited but it REALLY annoyed me that my colleague was so ready to dismiss it as too hard.

Asphyxia:

I am SO GLAD you were one of the people who would step in and bridge the gap. I am where I am today because of people like you who made the effort. It's a pity that teachers are often so dismissive but this is sadly still the case. Just recently I missed out on a painting class because the teacher couldn't be bothered with my access needs. It is upsetting every time and I never get over that.....

Nat:

Oh, can't help there! I'm a TERRIBLE painter. But seriously access is often just about making the effort, thinking outside the box. But we will get onto that more soon. Okay back to your books (i'm very easily sidetracked by circus talk!) - So your first books were the middle grade series The Grimstones based on your puppet show. Can you tell us a little bit about them?

Asphyxia:

First, I just want to say that I couldn't agree more. Access is often just about making the effort, usually only a small effort, at the right time. About my Grimstones book series...

The Grimstones started as a family of puppets and a series of giant books that open up to reveal the miniature rooms of the home they live in. Making them was probably the happiest year of my life, as I holed up in my tiny loft studio, sculpting, sewing, painting, making...

The Grimstones: Hatched is Martha's journal, her story told in her own words. Martha longs to cure her Mama of the lake of tears she cries every night, and she longs to get into her grandfather's apothecary to learn all there is to know about the casting of spells. Martha ends up hatching a plan that is a bit too big for her, that may have disastrous consequences...

You'll have to read the books to find out what they are.

Nat:

Oooooohhhh, love a bit of suspense. They really are stunning books so wonderfully creepy and magical. But you also have some BIG news on the horizon right? In very exciting news, you have a new book out in October called Future Girl. Now for our listeners, this book is for a slightly older audience than the books we typically cover. The main character is exploring a first romantic relationship and I would say it's for perhaps 13-16 years olds. But I've been lucky enough to have a sneak preview of it and it's just brilliant. Can you tell us about Future Girl?

Asphyxia:

I would love to as I am soooooo passionate about Future Girl. The book is the art journal of a Deaf sixteen-year-old, Piper.

Piper's mum wants her to be 'normal', to pass as hearing and get a good job. But when peak oil hits and Melbourne lurches towards environmental catastrophe, Piper has more important things to worry about, such as how to get food.

When she meets Marley, a CODA (child of Deaf adult), a door opens into a new world – where Deafness is something to celebrate rather than hide, and where resilience is created through growing your own food rather than it being delivered on a truck.

As she dives into learning Auslan, sign language that is exquisitely beautiful and expressive, Piper finds herself falling hard for Marley. But Marley, who has grown up in the Deaf community yet is not Deaf, is struggling to find his place in the hearing world. How can they be together?

The book covers themes that I am extremely passionate about - the high risk we face of environmental disaster, art journaling for self-expression, and Deafness.

Nat:

I absolutely LOVED this book. I could fill up a whole episode talking about it. Now before we dive into Piper, can I ask about your decision to set the book in a near-future Melbourne? You've created a frighteningly believable world that feels a little too close for comfort. Was that the idea?

Asphyxia:

For a long time I have believed it wouldn't take much for the world as we know it to change dramatically in the face of a crisis, and part of what I wanted to do with Future girl was highlight how very possible this is and the need for us to develop resilience and to prepare for such scenarios. At the time, my publishers actually asked me to pull back as the world I had created went too far, they thought. We were putting the final touches on the book when coronavirus hit, and we all looked at each other and said how utterly spooky it was that the book reflected so very closely what is going on now, today. I think the truth is that scientists have known this kind of crisis is heading our way, for a long time, but it's hard for the public to wake up and see how precarious our world is. I hope that now we all have first-hand experience of how dramatically a crisis will change our world, reading Future Girl will help people see how easily another crisis could tip things over as well. Resilience and preparation will help us be ready for all kinds of potential future scenarios.

Nat:

YEAH! *punches fist into the air* It's so true. Ok now let's talk about Piper. *sigh* Piper! I love her so much. She's so real and three dimensional and relatable and flawed and perfect all rolled up in a little ball of wonderful. Now that I have raved about her, you might feel a little bit shy about answering this question, but don't! So Piper is Deaf, grew up oral, relies on the very difficult task of lipreading and is learning Auslan later in life. Is it fair to say that her story is somewhat reflective of your own? How much did you draw on your own experience to create the character of Piper?

ie. Are you as amazing as Piper?

Asphyxia:

Hahaha you make me laugh. Piper IS amazing and I just love her, and loved creating her and writing about her. I think her way in the world is quite different to mine though, so if I am amazing too, well it is in a different way!

As to my own experiences, yes they are very much reflected in Piper even though she has a different personality to mine.

I grew up oral, which meant that I did not learn to sign (in fact I never even saw sign language until I was sixteen!), but instead focused on lipreading and speech. This is very common as usually deafness is diagnosed by doctors, who have a medical approach of trying to 'fix' us to help us fit into the hearing world and be as 'normal' as possible. However, in their late teens and early twenties, many deaf people

discover the Deaf community, and that that stage everything changes as they dive into a new culture where their Deafness is celebrated, and embrace Auslan (sign language), which means they can socialise without the headaches and stress associated with lipreading. This is exactly what happened to me. My story is very common and I wanted to reflect that in Future Girl.

However, I found writing about Deaf experience challenging, because Deafness was such an ordinary part of my existence that I rarely thought about it. I began jotting down my daily Deaf encounters - the little annoyances, confusing moments, benefits, the irritating things people say, and the complex feelings that arise when someone has tried to provide access but missed the mark.

I began to articulate aspects of Deafness I had never seen described before. For example, a Deaf dilemma: if I'm standing with a group of hearing people who are laughing, but I have no idea what they are laughing about, should I laugh along to be friendly (and if you do, are you somehow 'lying' about having understood?), or stand there with a stony face even though it could seem rude and unfriendly?

I realised everyday I was dealing with difficult decisions like this, but I have never stopped and thought about how I really wanted to respond! Through writing Future Girl, I became aware of so many aspects of my Deafness, and began making conscious choices about my behaviour!

Most of my discoveries about Deafness have gone into Future Girl. My editor, who thought she had a good grasp of Deafness, was stunned by the layers to our experience that she had never considered.

Nat:

Yes! Me too! I mean I never thought I was an expert or anything, but thought (or maybe hoped) that my grasp was slightly above average, but I got SOOOOO schooled by your book. It was awesome. I love being schooled! Keeps me in my box a little 😊 On that note (I'm going to jump to Q6 because it follows well and will come back to Q5) Despite thinking I knew a little bit about Deaf culture and the Deaf community but I had this wonderful experience when reading your book of sometimes feeling very connected to parts of it (like bursting into tears when Piper got her sign name) and then also feeling so schooled on certain aspects like the nuances of the way Auslan is used that can make it easier or more difficult to understand. People living entirely in the hearing world will learn so much from reading your book, but to tease them a little, what would you most like people to know about Deaf culture?

Asphyxia:

I love that you burst into tears when Piper got her name sign - that shows you understand what a HUGE honour it is in the Deaf community to be given a name sign, something many hearing people don't understand as they assume that names are issued the same way they are in hearing culture.

BTW I am really interested to know some of the things you learnt from the book if you feel like sharing a bit more about that?

As to what I would like people to know about Deaf culture, that is a really hard question to answer! Really the thing I most want people to know about Deaf culture is that it exists. Most people have no idea. Parents whose baby is diagnosed as deaf by medical professionals do not realise that there is a Deaf community out there. If they knew, it could transform their grief about their child's 'defectiveness' into delight that their child will receive an automatic passport to this wonderful community.

The most striking difference between the Deaf community and the hearing world is that we celebrate Deafness, while the hearing world tends to view it as a 'defect'. We love our language, as it is expressive and poetic and delightful. We are so direct - there is no need for the euphemisms and careful politeness that is needed to navigate hearing culture - we just say it like it is and that's ok. While in the hearing world, people feel sorry for me when they realise I am Deaf, in the Deaf community I have a high status and no-one would dream of feeling sorry for me - instead people want some of what I have.

But really, if you want to know more about Deaf culture, and really dive into understanding it, read *Future Girl* and go with Piper on her journey as she meets the Deaf community.

Nat:

I second that! I actually saw a Tweet the other day asking about books of fiction that used sign language and Twitterverse had real trouble coming up with any examples. It shows that we really need more of what you're doing AND that you are really filling a gap in the market. Perfect equation for a runaway hit, I say. Of course I shouted out to *Future Girl* but did explain that all people without connections like me will have to wait until October. Poor, poor unconnected masses - BA HA!

Asphyxia:

You are right... there is very little out there that reflects sign language and Deaf community. And the little that IS out there is often very poorly done. I am fed up with unrealistic media that sends poor messages, such as the picture book *Boy* which features a Deaf child who is routinely excluded from his community and yet somehow magically becomes a hero for completely unrealistic reasons. Another example is the movie *MVP: Most Valuable Primate* which features a little girl and chimp who sign to each other... using gibberish! Yes - made up sign language! These portrayals of us and our language suggest that it is fine to make a mockery of our language. Imagine a kids' movie in which all the spoken language was pure gibberish and it was promoted as being an example of English! They show Deaf people serenely unbothered in the face of the worst exclusion. People consume this media and think it's ok to behave like that towards us! I wanted to show that it is NOT. This makes me furious!

So that's partly why I wanted to write *Future Girl*, to redress some of this balance.

When I decided to make Piper Deaf, I did so because I was hungry to read books and watch movies about Deaf people. As a Deaf person, it is deeply disappointing to me how rarely we are represented in

the media. I almost never get to read stories that depict my own language (Auslan), my culture (the Deaf community) and in which characters go through the same struggles and tribulations as I do. Imagine that you are a white non-religious hearing girl from Australia, and the only books and movies you have access to were created in Saudi Arabia and depict Muslim men carrying out traditional practices. While you might be very interested in the culture in Saudi Arabia and enjoy watching Muslim men in their everyday lives, you might share that hunger I feel to see representations of yourself and your life in the media.

Nat:

Yes, yes and yes! This leads us into the discussion of the theme of this episode today #OWNVOICES. I am a big fan of not only the push for kidlit to be more diverse in its content but also more diverse in its creators. Can you tell me a little about what the #ownvoices movement means to you and how important it is to change the scope of kids books and their creators?

Asphyxia:

Really it is for all the reasons I have just talked about. We need authentic, accurate portrayals of Deafness so that hearing people develop realistic insight into what it means to be Deaf, and to validate the lived experience of Deaf people, so that we can see ourselves reflected in the media. It is easy to take for granted the privilege of having yourself and your lifestyle reflected back to you in movies and books, but when you don't have that, it's very painful, it creates a huge hunger and appetite within that community.

I feel it acutely, so I wrote the book I wanted to read.

Nat:

Did you feel it as a Deaf child? Or is it something that you became aware of in later life and could recognise how it might have effected you as a child?

Asphyxia:

As a Deaf child it was not something I thought about, as it didn't even occur to me to think that things could be different. It's like with feminism, how you can grow up with very patriarchal values and they just seem normal to you, until someone points out how bizarre the same scenarios would feel if we cast men in the women's roles and vice versa. Suddenly you see the huge imbalance. But it can be really hard for us to see.

While I had never thought about it consciously, it still affected me. The effect was that I felt myself defective compared to hearing people, I felt a huge pressure to pass as hearing which I never questioned, because I had never seen another person nor character behave in a different way, and I felt acutely aware of all the ways that I was unlike hearing people and a strong need to cover it up to be

more like others. Had I had books and movies showing Deafness as different but positive, then I could have used this as role models for my own responses to the world. Maybe I would have spoken up more or challenged the status quo or asked for my needs to be met, rather than suffering hours of boredom quietly when I didn't know what was going on, because I saw everyone else sitting still and quiet.

Nat:

Absolutely and I think this is reflected really powerfully in the relationship between Piper and her mum which is heartbreaking and tender and sad and cementing all at once. I think it's one of the most powerful things about the book. Getting back to the question you asked me before about what I learnt from the book, the idea that a mum could sort of cause so much pain for her kid by trying to do 'the best' for them. It just comes back to that complete lack of understanding and need to connect with a community to have some real understanding of it.

Asphyxia:

Sadly this is a really, really common theme in the Deaf community. So many Deaf people talk about how their parents tried so hard to do their best, do what was right for them, but inadvertently held them back and created more pressure and stress for them. This is another reason the Deaf community is valuable, because connection with the Deaf community can help parents understand how they can support their kids in a way that doesn't inadvertently add stress and pressure. Although Future Girl is written for teens, I really hope that parents of deaf children will read it to gain an insight into how they can support their children better. Hopefully the next generation of Deaf kids will not need to deal with this.

Nat:

Absolutely. In reading your book, I also learnt a lot about Deaf people being custodians of sign language and whose place it is to use and teach it. I've been following some public conversations about the appropriation of Auslan on a very high profile platform recently, at the same time as I was reading your book and I think it's something that A LOT of people don't understand or are aware of. But with books like yours, it will become something people start to question and wrap their heads around.

Asphyxia:

Yes this is a big issue in the Deaf community right now. We have such a history of hearing people intervening and telling us how/when it is ok to sign, and changing our language and our natural form of expression, believing that they are 'helping' us when they are actually stifling us. As a result, the Deaf community has become very protective of Auslan, to prevent this from happening again. So we have rules that only Deaf people (and perhaps CODAs - children of Deaf adults) can teach Auslan. Now when we see hearing people taking our language and bastardising it, it makes us furious - not just because of

the individual doing it but a collective historical fury that relates to hundreds of years of Deaf oppression by well meaning hearing people.

Nat:

I love that. I heard it explained that Deaf culture is just like any other culture with its own language, traditions, beliefs, art and history and needs to be treated with the respect of any other culture. When I hang out with people from the Deaf community, you can really feel that pride of culture. It's really beautiful. Ok back to the books! Circus and Auslan segways are my weaknesses! So talking about art, as well as being completely blown away by the story, I was absolutely GOBSMACKED by the art journal style of the book and I absolutely cannot wait to get a hardcopy in my hands. So as well as being an author, circus performer and puppeteer extraordinaire, you are also an incredible artist. Can you tell us a bit about your process from the art side of things with your books?

Asphyxia:

Of course! I love talking about art. I have been passionate about art journaling for many years and have shelves full of my own art journals. I wanted to create an art journal that was simultaneously a novel, and the result is Future Girl. It took eight years to create the book!

I started by creating page backgrounds. I painted, plastered pieces of fabric, doodled on notepaper, sprayed through stencils, compiled collections of my favourite papers for collage, and assembled everything into pages that had nice clear areas in the centre for text.

All these pieces were scanned and then I worked digitally to create multiple versions of these original artworks, through changing colours and adding varied collage elements and doodles. In my own art journals, there are symbols, textures, patterns and motifs that I use repeatedly - these help to give the books a feeling of being an integrated coherent whole. I wanted to do the same for Piper's journal, by reusing motifs in a variety of forms.

Since I was not highly proficient in Photoshop, I was fortunate to work with Jenine Davidson, who worked with me on The Grimstones. Over the years Jenine was incredible, sending me tutorials explaining the specific Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign techniques I needed to master, and lifting individual layers from scanned artworks I sent her so I could recombine them with others.

I compiled a huge library of backgrounds, images and artworks for Future Girl. The final step, once the manuscript was finalised and I knew exactly what text would go on what page, was to draw from this library to put together each page - all 384 of them!

Jenine was going to do this step but in the end she had to pull out for family reasons, so it fell to me. Enter several months of frantic work as I barely surfaced to gulp for air, as I raced the clock to learn

everything I needed to know about page design and master the technical side of Photoshop sufficiently to pull it off.

Although I am confident as an artist and know how to create a pleasing composition on a canvas, I found it extremely difficult to get elements to look 'right' on the page. Take page 95 as an example. I had drawn some persimmons, as the text referred to them. But how to put my persimmon drawings on the page and make them look good? I spent hours and hours on this. No matter where I put the persimmons - half on and half off the page? Large? Small? - they just looked terrible. I tried so many different angles before I had the idea of putting them on an envelope. Even then, they were underwhelming. I tried adding white behind them. That helped, but still ... something was missing. Eventually I had the idea to add a spoon, and suddenly it all came together. The page had that magical balance I was searching for.

I found page after page an extreme struggle, as I added pre-prepared elements that just didn't look right. How did Jenine do this? I used to give her components and she would arrange them in a way that came up as delightful, quirky and visually harmonious. But as I slogged onward, page after page, sometimes giving one a rest and revisiting it later with a fresh mind, something started to gel. By the last hundred or so pages, I was working faster. I had my keyboard shortcuts for Photoshop down pat. I knew, more intuitively, how to aim for something that might work. I also knew what had failed visually and which avenues not to go down.

While those months were breathtakingly pressured, they were also immensely satisfying, as I slowly saw page designs emerge that were actually lovely, and took delight in my newly honed digital skills. Would I do it any other way? No. Although I was so disappointed not to work with Jenine, whose energy and artistic vision I adore, I am thrilled to have developed my design skills to this extent. I now feel confident to create a visual design for a page that has balance and appeal. I am fast and proficient in many Photoshop features that had eluded me before - a skill that will be highly useful for the future.

Best of all, when I hold Future Girl in my hands, I know that artwork was all my creation and I just can't believe I did it.

Nat:

Ok so then the BIG question! WHEN DO YOU GET A HARD COPY!?!?!

Or more importantly, when can I get a hard copy?

Asphyxia:

The books have just landed in Australia now! But officially they will be released on the first October. I am taking pre-orders via my online shop, Fixie's Shelf, on Etsy, and I will be posting them out in September.

Nat:

So that means a real life hard copy is not far from your hands?
You must be SO excited!

Asphyxia:

Well I have my very first author copy here - the printers sent us a few proofs. And I cried when I first held it in my hands. I could not believe how perfect it was. Eight years and finally it's a book!

I really and truly cannot wait to share it with the world. Only a couple of months away now!! I will send you a copy as soon as I have them and am allowed to.

Nat:

Eeeekkk! I am soooooo happy for you. I bet you cried! I'm almost crying for you. Well congrats, every second of that 8 years was worth it. Your book is stunning and you should be immensely proud of not only what you have achieved, but of the gift you are giving. Ok, so even though I don't want this interview to end, like all awesome things, it must. So lastly, what's next for you and where can our listeners find out more about you?

Asphyxia:

Thank you for your lovely words. Yes, I am incredibly proud of this. My editor said, 'This is your masterpiece!' and I have to agree, only I would change her word to 'mistresspiece'!!

Well I never really know what's just around the corner - life has surprised me many times with sudden changes of direction. Right now I am dealing with full on chronic health issues which confine me to bed, so my options are a bit limited. But meanwhile I am learning oil painting and have visions of painting an entire exhibition from bed. I can see it in my mind's eye - Two White Queens, about love and abundance between women.

I've also, strangely enough, been writing songs and composing music. With my hearing aids I can hear a little but many notes/pitches are completely missing, so when I listen to conventional music it sounds like it stops and starts - awful. But I compose music only of notes I can hear, and not too much happening at the same time so it doesn't descend into white noise, and then I really enjoy listening to it. It's hard to get someone else to make music for me because they can't hear what I can hear, so I have been on this intense learning curve to discover how to make my own music! I have also embraced writing song lyrics, which has been very therapeutic. If I am ever well enough to get out of bed again, I have visions of making music videos with Auslan, and signing to my original songs.

In the meantime I need to take it one day at a time and do what I can with the limited capacity that I have.

As to where to find me online, head to my website asphyxia.com.au where you will find free Auslan lessons, heaps of Deaf activism, blog posts about reducing our resource footprint to 10% of the average, an art journal course, and page after page of my art.

BTW if you get an error when trying to access my website, something about people trying to steal your information, that is not the case with my website! You can safely click to proceed - I just haven't yet worked out how to get rid of that error!!! Ahh.. the joys of technology!

Nat:

I'm so sorry to hear you aren't well but that all sounds amazing and I will be watching your next steps closely (not in a creepy way, that totally sounded creepy!) Asphyxia, it has been SUCH a pleasure talking to you and thank you so much for being on the show. We will put all your details in our show notes and point people in all the right directions to find your books and learn more about Auslan and the Deaf community. Sending big virtual hugs to you and thank you again.

Asphyxia:

Thank you so much. I have really enjoyed chatting with you and getting to know you better. Thanks for interviewing me today - it has been a total pleasure. And ha - nothing creepy about that! I am also going to be watching your next steps closely too! Big virtual hugs right back to you!

Liz:

Wow, that was fascinating Nat. I really enjoyed listening to that. I just feel like, in that interview, I just learnt so much that I didn't know about the deaf community.

Nat:

Yeah, well you should try reading the book because I learned so much I didn't know by reading the book as well. It's such an amazing, amazing book. I just loved it.

Liz:

Yeah, I can't wait to read it actually.

Kate:

Asphyxia sounds so multi talented, she's one of those people I'm like, you've done this and you've done that and you've done that as well, really? And the way she was talking about, yeah I just totally learned how to design a book on the fly. No biggie. Well actually she did say biggie, but still, just the fact she could do it at all!

Nat:

Yeah. And now she's like, Oh, I'm now just probably going to... I've got some spare time on my hands. I might just start writing some music. I'm sorry, what?

Liz:

Yeah. Like how dare you.

Kate:

That sounded amazing? I would be so keen to listen to that. Just that idea that it's, Hey guys, these are the sounds that I can hear. And if there's other stuff in there, I can't hear it. I just think that's super cool.

Nat:

I love the idea of making a song or making music using only the notes that she can hear. Like there's something just so beautiful in that. Yeah. I just really like it. I just think it sounds amazing. I really want to have a listen when she's done.

Okay. Kate. Well, we're two interviews down. I think that just leaves your interview with Alison Evans.

Kate:

I guess it does. I so enjoyed doing this interview. Alison was lovely to speak to. They're super talented as anyone who's read their books will certainly know. And their voice was so soothing. I was just like sitting there totally blissing out while I was chatting to Alison.

Nat:

Yeah. I had the same feeling like you were both in a cafe, just chatting it out over some Chai lattes or something.

Kate:

That was pretty much it. Only on the computer.

Liz:

Minus the lattes.

Nat:

Yeah. Minus everything pretty much, being together, being in the cafe, lattes.

Liz:

So it wasn't like that?

Nat:

No it wasn't like that at all.

Let's have a listen.

Kate:

Alison Evans is the award-winning author of the queer YA books *Ida*, *Highway Bodies*, and *Euphoria Kids*. Alison is a contributor in *Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories*, co-edits the zine *Concrete Queers* and is the fiction editor for *#enbylife*. They are based on Wurundjeri Land/Melbourne, Australia.

Kate:

Hi Alison. Thank you so much for coming on One More Page.

Alison:

Hey, Kate thanks for having me.

Kate:

First of all, I'd love it if you can tell us a little bit about yourself and about how and why you became a writer?

Alison:

Yeah, well I am an author of young adult fiction. I've got three books out, *Ida*, *Highway Bodies* and my latest book is *Euphoria Kids*. I started writing fan fiction actually in high school and basically never stopped. And then I thought maybe I could write my own stuff, so I started doing that in probably late high school. I went to uni to study writing and yeah, that's it really. I started off writing Green Day fan fiction, like the band. And then I moved on to Harry Potter and then... probably most of my stuff was Harry Potter. Like the marauders stuff before the actual books came out. So like, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin -

Kate:

Oh cool.

Alison:

It was so fun. And then I started later doing Hobbit stuff when the Hobbit movie came out, I'm a big nerd. And then Mass Effect the video game series. I wrote a lot of fiction, for the Mass Effect stuff. It was great.

Kate:

Wow, that's awesome. That sounds like a lot of fun actually. I feel like that's a stage in my becoming a writer journey that I really missed out on. Maybe I should get started now? There's no time like the present.

Alison:

Yeah, do it. Exactly.

Kate:

So your first book, *Ida* was the winner of the People's Choice Awards at the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, a few years back. That's pretty impressive and pretty meaningful too, as a People's Choice Award. And I remember, it got a lot of press at the time and I was wondering how it felt to receive that award?

Alison:

I think honestly People's Choice, I think is the best award. I think especially for a YA book because if you're writing YA it's because you want that audience, you want to connect to people more than anything. So I'm quite happy I won the People's Choice. That was really nice. And it's just cool to win an award for a book that has so many queer and trans characters in it. I think Daisy, one of the characters in the book is of the first non-binary characters in a mainstream like traditionally published Australian YA. So that was pretty cool.

Kate:

Right.

Alison:

I liked that.

Kate:

Yeah. That's amazing and all of your books, in fact, heavily feature characters with various gender identities and also various sexualities. So why is that so important to you and why is it such a recurring theme in your work?

Alison:

It's the reason that I write YA, because when I was a teenager and questioning my sexuality and my gender, I was looking for those books and I found a few American ones, but they were all about either gay men or gay boys or lesbians. And there weren't really any explicitly bisexual characters.. because I am bi. Or if there was a character who was bi, they would always say that they didn't like labels and no one wanted to use the actual word itself, which is very strange.

And I think, especially with trans stuff, I didn't read any books with a non-binary protagonist until I was 24 and my friend wrote one and got it published. And I think that was the very first time where I saw explicit representation of a non-binary person. I just think, when you're a kid and you're trying to figure out stuff, it can be really lonely. I was a huge bookworm and I know I was looking for that. And I guess teens now are looking for it too. I think it's different because they have the internet and so much more access to information, but still, that's why I write, I think for all trans teens and queer teens, just to see themselves reflected a little bit in YA, yeah.

Kate:

Your own work aside, do you think that we're seeing more... I feel like we're seeing more books with diverse sexualities represented. I'm not so aware of that many in terms of trans and non-binary characters. Do you think that there's an improvement in the amount of stuff out there now or not really?

Alison:

Yeah, I think like... because I did my honors year in 2013 in, bi and non-binary representation in YA. And I think there were like... Melinda Lowe, who is a U S writer. She put out a list every year of all the stats. And there were enough that there... like you could count them all and you could sort of separate them. But now she doesn't... I don't think she does the list anymore because there are so many books and so many books published outside of the U S that you just can't read them all. Which I think is great because now I can go into Kmart where you buy cheap books, which is where I had to buy my books as a teen. Because I couldn't really afford bookstores. And now you can see queer books in Kmart and Big W and stuff like that, which is really cool. I think we still have a long way to go, but it is... I think it's getting a lot better. I think even the reception of me as a non-binary person has quite... like the difference between 2017 and now is remarkable. There's a stark difference, which is really cool. I feel a lot more comfortable now, which is cool.

Kate:

Yeah. So your latest book is Euphoria Kids. I was wondering if you can tell us a little bit about it?

Alison:

Yeah. So it is a young adult book, for the younger side. So I would say teens from about 13 up, which is the target audience and it follows two teens. So there's Iris who was born from a seed in the ground and then there's Babs who's made of fire. And the two of them don't really have any friends. And then they meet on the bus one day and then the magic unfurls from there. Iris learns that Babs is invisible most of the time, which is why they've never met before. And they have to... it's not like, there is a plot where Babs is cursed and the friends, they meet another friend called the boy and they all have to go in search of the witch and get Babs uncursed. But it's quite a soft book. Not a lot really happens, it's very quiet. I wrote it because I was really sad and I wanted to write about all the things that make me happy. So like, trans kids who have a loving family and crystals and magic and the bush and fairies and stuff. So it's all... it's basically everything that I love, but in a book.

Kate:

I love that. That's just like, it's sort of an autobiography, but not. It's like a spiritual autobiography in a way.

Alison:

Yeah, it is. That's nice.

Kate:

That's cool. I really love the title, Euphoria Kids as well. So I'd love for you to tell us a little bit about why you chose the title and what it means?

Alison:

So basically in, I guess, popular discourse, trans people are defined by our lack of something. The way that it's spun is that we have a lack of something or being in the wrong body or whatever. And gender dysphoria is talked about a lot but I only recently came across the term gender euphoria, which is the opposite, which is where you feel content in yourself. And basically it's a bit more complicated than that, but that's the main takeaway from it. I just wanted a happy trans book because there aren't a lot, or at least the mainstream view of us is that we're all really sad and really depressed. And I just wanted something that was happy and nice and captured that magic that you feel when you find people like you. And that's basically why I wrote it really, I think. And the title came from that idea of gender euphoria and I wasn't sure what to call it. Euphoria teens sounds a bit weird, so I called it Euphoria Kids.

Kate:

Yeah, that's great. And I know there is a moment in the story which passes pretty quickly, but where one of the characters explains this to one of the other characters and I just remember reading it being quite... it does bring that joy, doesn't it, that sense of uplifting sense of all that's positive. And I think that was just a really small, but beautiful moment in the book.

Alison:

Thank you.

Kate:

So Euphoria Kids features witches, as you've mentioned, magic... and you've got Babs who disappears. Highway Bodies has a zombie apocalypse and Ida involves a parallel universe. So what is it that you enjoy about stepping outside the real world and playing with fantastical concepts?

Alison:

I think it's just, it's really fun. And I think it's kind of like a mode of play almost, because I really love writing and I do it because it's fun and because I love it. And writing about these kinds of weird, strange ideas is, it's just fun to think about. And it's kind of the thing that I would read as a kid. Like I would read Faraway Tree and Garth Nix's, Abhorsen series and all that kind of Australian fantasy that came out in the late nineties, early two thousands, which was just, ah, it was the best. I like stuff that is quite rooted in the real world, like our world, but with a little twist in it, which... I just really liked that twist in.

Kate:

Do you feel that your books have quite an Australian feel, in general or is that particular to Euphoria Kids?

Alison:

I think it would be all of them. I think because I grew up in the Dandenongs and Ida is set there. I don't think I actually explicitly say it, but I guess I just had to write about it. And Highway Bodies, one of the characters, who's a narrating character, she has quite an ocker accent. I don't know, I just really like writing about the landscape of Australia.

Kate:

It's really nice to read Australian fantasy because so much fantasy... I love fantasy too. I grew up with Enid Blyton as well, but so much of it feels either, very other worldly or quite English, pixies and brownies and fairies, and especially for people like me, who've read so much Enid Blyton you get that association. So I always just enjoy that stuff that has that Aussie touch. I suppose even like the Gumnut Babies, they're not magical, but there's that little fairy kind of element that I really love that sort of thing.

Alison:

Yeah. I think it's also just cool. Australia's pretty cool.

Kate:

It is pretty cool. So one thing I noticed about Euphoria Kids is that you really expect your reader to keep up with you, in terms of concepts. You start off and I think you might've mentioned this earlier, Iris was born from a seed in the ground. So they're made of plants and their friend Babs is made of fire, but you don't really tell us any more about that and then you just leave it to our imaginations to fill in the blanks. So I guess I was wondering whether you were ever tempted to go deeper on that or do you really just enjoy going with it and trusting that your audience will come along for the ride?

Alison:

Yeah. I really like a light touch, in terms of world building and stuff like that. I think there's this author A.S. King who is, I'm pretty sure she's American. And the way she writes, you can tell that she just

completely trusts her audience. She's another young adult writer and she respects teenagers a lot. And that really comes through in her work because she writes about quite heavy themes. And I think for me, that's what I'm trying to do. Because I know, when you are a teenager and an adult is trying to explain things to you and it's yeah, I get it, I know. Just because I'm a teenager doesn't mean I don't understand. And I think, I was just trying to do what Amy does, where she just trusts that they'll get it and yeah, I guess that's what I was trying to do too.

Kate:

Yeah, exactly. So I was wondering what other projects you might have on the go, whether other books or other things and whether you've got any other books coming up?

Alison:

It was just announced on Monday actually, there's a new anthology of #LoveOzYA short stories called, Hometown Haunts, I believe.

Kate:

I think I saw that. Is it horror?

Alison:

Yes. So it's published by Wakefield Press. Poppy Nwosu is editing it and I'm scared because I'm such a big wuss but she asked me to be a part of it, so I said, yes. That comes out in October 2021. So it's a long time away, but it's going to be cool. There's going to be lots of horror. I think four spots in it are from open submissions. So anyone who writes YA or wants to write YA, there's a little opening for you. So that's all that I've officially got coming out at the moment. I'm currently writing my next, hopefully my next YA book. I think it's going to be a two book series. It's set in the future. It's about super power teens and taking over government and stuff. I'm still in the editing stages on that one, but we'll see what happens.

Kate:

Cool. Well, that all sounds amazing. If people want to find out more about you or any of your work, where can they go to find that out?

Alison:

And so my website is alisonwritesthings.com, Alison with one L and I have a Twitter account underscore budgie, budgie like the bird or my Instagram is [@alisonwritesthings](https://www.instagram.com/alisonwritesthings).

Kate:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much. We'll put all that info in the show notes and thanks again for coming on One More Page.

Alison:

Yeah. Thank you so much.

Nat:

I love listening to that interview, Kate. I love that Alison got their start writing fan fiction. It's something that I really feel like I missed out on too. And if I had it over, I would totally get into it. Although, I didn't know there was computer game fan fiction. But, yes, of course there is. And I also really like that Alison talked about writing happy stories, not issues books or anything like that. It was like happy trans kids.

Kate:

Yeah. I love that too. I think that's fantastic. And I think OwnVoices has been a really amazing movement, but for every positive there's always those things that don't quite work out. And one of the things that I've seen OwnVoices authors talking about is that they feel like they're pigeonholed into writing issues books. That if they say, Oh, I just want to write, this great, exciting, happy book then sometimes publishers are like, "Ah no, but we really wanted you to write about how tricky it is growing up or whatever." So I think it's nice to see that diversity of experience and stuff and those really happy joyful books as well.

Nat:

And you could hear it in their voice when they were talking about it. Alison was so excited and so happy to have written something that was exciting and happy.

Liz:

And isn't Euphoria Kids, just the perfect name and such a gorgeous name for a book.

Kate: I love it.

Liz:

I love it too.

Nat:

So nice.

Liz:

Yay. Well guys, this has been an awesome way to celebrate 50 episodes of One More Page, but unfortunately it's that time of the show where we have to say goodbye.

Children:

No, we want one more page.

Nat:

But don't worry. We'll be back next month for a Picture Book Palooza featuring some of your very favorite Australian picture book authors and illustrators.

Liz:

So I don't want to gush too much, but we'll just mention that I'm going to be interviewing one of my very favorite picture book creators ever for our next episode. I wonder if anyone can guess who it is.

Nat:

I know! I know! I know!

Liz:

You do not. How would you know?

Nat:

Because I hooked it up.

Liz:

Well, everyone else can find out next month on a very exciting (for me anyway) episode of One More Page.

Kate:

Thanks for listening to this episode of One More Page. Visit our website onemorepagepodcast.com for the shownotes and to listen to all our previous episodes.

Liz:

You can also subscribe to the podcast via itunes or your favourite podcast app. Keep in touch through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram – find us on each @onemorepageau. You can also email us at onemorepagepodcast@gmail.com

Nat:

And finally, a big thank you to Marianne Khoo who does our awesome illustrations and Adam Orłowski, our sound editor extraordinaire. So max out your library card, loiter in your local bookshop & tune in next time for another episode of One More Page.

Kids:

Shhhh! One More Page.