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William Meyer

170: Writing a Middle Grade Series

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes today are over at diymfa.com/170 because it's Episode 170. Also, DIY MFA Radio was brought to you by our amazing fans and supporters on Patreon. If you'd like to help support the show and receive some awesome bonuses, hop on over to patreon.com/diymfa to learn more.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of speaking to Middle Grade author William Meyer! He is a high school teacher in New York, and from the Indus River to the Italian Renaissance, no topic has piqued the imagination of his students quite as intensely as the study of Ancient Egypt. And, I also feel the same way; like when I was a kid and a teenager, I loved Ancient Egypt. I'm still obsessed with it.

And as a result of both their interest and his own childhood curiosity about it, and about the mysteries of that era, he wrote the Horace j. Edwards and the Time Keepers series; and that's what we're going to be talking about today. In many ways, this middle grade series reflects his experiences both as a kid and as a teacher. So, welcome, Bill. It is so great to have you on the show.

William Meyer: Oh, I'm so excited to be on it. Thank you.

GP: So, I always love to start out by asking about the story behind the story; and I suspect there's probably a story behind your series. So, can you share with us, why did you write this series to begin with; and also, what inspired the second book, in particular?

WM: Yeah, that's a great question. The fact there are many stories behind this story, but probably the biggest piece I often think is my grandfather. And I remember vividly him visiting my first grade classroom after he'd taken a trip to Egypt and sitting there in the class, watching him go through these incredible slides and images of Egyptian temples, the Egyptian statues.

But the piece that really stuck with me is when he shared this image of an Egyptian mummy, sort of the whole class gasped. From that point on, sort of, I had this long-running obsession with all things Egypt; and that has sort of woven in its way in and out of my life. And even as I was writing the story, all these other pieces were starting to surface within my own life, connected to Egypt.

For example, I guess I had this stuffed hippo when I was a little kid that I called Horus. And when I started researching what the name Horus for the connection to the Egyptian God, and then I discovered sort of the presence of the Horuses in the world in the 20th century; and its connection to Michigan and their connection to Egypt. The story in many ways, just sort of wrote itself in these layers, in layers of history and connection to the past, but also to my own life.

GP: I love it. You know, it just brings back so many childhood memories for me as well, because as a kid-- I grew up in New York City, as my listeners have already heard me say numerous times on this show, and I'm just slightly obsessed with like "all things New York". One of the best parts of New York, of course, is the Metropolitan Museum. So, I remember going into that museum as a kid and like just getting lost in that Egyptian section.

And, now, of course, the Natural History Museum has this amazing mummy exhibit. I actually just took my kids to see the mummies. The fact that they're like doing, what is it, MRI or CAT Scan, CT Scans on the mummies to see what's inside without unwrapping them; that blew my mind. I thought it was so cool.

WM: It's incredible. And then I remember I actually-- I was living in Michigan, and I had moved back to New York. My wife and I had just got married, and I had started the writing process of sort of the first story. I was like Lauren, let's go down to the MET; let's check out the Egyptian exhibit. I remember the day we went through that exhibit, we were looking at all these different pieces.

And I was trying to research more about Horus this, Horus that, the Falcon god. We got to the end of the gallery and my wife was like, "Bill, you've got to come over here." And, as you had mentioned earlier, my real name is William, but I go by Bill. I go over there and she goes, "Look at this." And, I looked down, and this little glass case was a blue hippopotamus and its name was William.

And, you probably know this; William is like the mascot of the MET. There's this incredible story about that hippo and how the family that once owned this piece would see it, the piece as sort of blessing or frowning upon the decisions it was making on its life. It was sort of an emulate protecting the family. And I was like, 'this is crazy'.

I had this hippo when I was a kid and in the book, the scar beetle was blue and it was just sort of an affirmation to just keep on, keep it on, because I think sometimes when you're writing you're in that process; it can get into some pretty barren landscape. And so, whatever places or stories or motivation you can find really are sort of like, is so important and so nurturing.

GP: That is fantastic. And I have to just say, just to like geek out a little bit, I have a little blue scare beetle thing that was from, I think it's the museum, the British museum. My parents brought it back, because they know that like I'm obsessed with all this random stuff. And, they always bring back things when they travel to other countries. I have this like on my table, in my living room, this little blue scare of beetle thing. So, when I was reading the book and I'm like, 'oh my gosh, the scare of beetle is blue'; and it was like this whole thing.

[laughter]

GP: So, I loved it. But one thing I think is so interesting also, in particular, we're focusing-- I want to focus our discussion on the second book since that's the one that I've been reading, and it's the one that's out most recently and second books can always be a little tricky, right? Like, there's not quite that same honeymoon feeling you get with Book One.

So, can you talk a little bit about some of the decisions you made when you were preparing to write the second book and then writing it to kind of keep that momentum going? Like, how did you go about it?

WM: Yeah, that's a great question in, and in fact, I wish I had heard what you had said before I started the second book [laughs] because I needed a real recalibration. And then later on, I discovered as I

think many people do, that the second book is a lot harder to write than the first book. One; you just don't have the space and the time. I got the second book at the very end of finishing the first book.

And, at that point, I had some broad sketches and understandings of what I wanted to do in that second book, as it sort of fit into the larger series that I hadn't flushed it out to the details that I had in the first book. The other piece is I was also in the midst of beginning promotion of the first book while juggling this other world of trying to write the second book and talking about the first book.

So, it was really a strange place to be in. I think what was really helpful for me is I flushed out a really detailed outline with my editor. I think that brought some clarity and focus to my writing, which allowed me to be in multiple worlds simultaneously; to be in the world of the first book, talking about it, talking about Egypt, but to be writing the second book, which really connects the main character back to Detroit in the 1920s.

And without that outline, that grounding aspect, I think it would've struggled a lot more within that much more condensed timeline and a much more, you know, a lot more demands on me as a writer and my own expectations, but also in the expectations that my publisher had for it.

GP: Oh my gosh. There's so much in there that I want to unpack, but first, I need to know; how do you outline, because that's one of my nerdy obsessions. I love outlining and different techniques, and I have all these different ways that I do it. So, what do you do literally? Like, is it a list, like chapter by chapter? Do you do index cards? How do you do it?

WM: That's a great question too. It's funny, I prefer bullet points; and I like those bullet points within the chapters. So, I have my chapters and then I start to bullet point them. I think, for me, that's an easy way in which I can then move those bullets around. My publisher likes the outlines submitted in more of a paragraph format. Obviously, I have to convert my bullet points into those pieces; and it takes more of a narrative flow.

The only problem I think with outlining in narrative is it becomes more difficult to make those moves where you might want to change a scene, drop it, you know, change a time. All these little things that I think are very easy to tweak when things are in bullets, become a lot more cumbersome when you're trying to retool a narrative flow or a paragraph piece.

So, for me, it's bullet points and whether it's outlining a book, outlining a trip I'm going to take, or outlining, you know, a more academic piece that I'm going to write; it's always bullet points. That's sort of my go-to.

GP: You know, it's interesting that you say bullet points because I use dots in my outlines as well, but not in the way you would expect; I actually outline like subway maps. So, my outlines are these like different interwoven subway maps where like the different thrusts of the story or if it's like a non-narrative piece, like the thrusts of the argument I'm trying to make broken down into the different subway lines, because I'm a New Yorker.

Like, I think I live and breathe the subways. So, that's like how-- I think it's like hardwired into my brain at this point. So, anyway, like it's interesting that for you, you see the dots, the bullet is being really mobile. That's why I love the subway map method, because you can just pick up a little dot on the map and just move it somewhere else and be like, 'all right, it's just a dot, you can move it around'. So, it feels a lot more daunting when it's narrative.

WM: Yeah. I think you're right too. It's like, how do you find a format that honors that nonlinear narrative? I think that what you're describing is a powerful way to do that. I remember in the first book, treating some outlines that were these webbings. I think, for me, as a writer, that's a very comfortable space.

And, I find like the publisher wants, at least, a more together presentation, whether that's the reality of how things are or what's happening behind the scenes. So, it's always sort of balancing the appearance of what comes out, the publisher versus actually what's going on. I think probably that subway map is far more accurate than, you know, the clean bullets or the clean narrative.

GP: You know, as you were talking about like the, you know, honoring what the publisher wants, it brought back this memory of when I was in grad school; and I've been outlining this way forever. And so I was in the MFA program and I had to write this term paper; like this big fat, almost like a thesis-type paper.

And, I hand in my outline and it's a subway map, and the professor looks at it and goes, "I don't know what to do with this. So, you're going to have to try again." And, it was like this moment where he's like, 'I know this is cool, but I just, I can't'. And then, so I went home and I translated this like subway map outline to like words.

And I'm like, "Here you go. If you need words, here they are." It's actually become a running joke. He recently ran-- I ran into him at a conference, and he stepped into a talk that I was giving where I was explaining the subway map. And he's like, "I remember that from class." So, it's sort of this running joke in my life.

WM: Well, it's a language; and it's your language. And, I think that's so important to work with that language we're most comfortable with. And if we're trying to communicate story, and I think while there might be a professor, whoever, who has a different set of expectations, I think it's important that the writer really honors that language. They find the story coming out from within them in whatever form, that is, to honor that.

GP: Spoken like a true teacher, right?

WM: [laughs] Yeah.

GP: Like that's sort of the teacher's approach, I think, like-- I mean, as the mom of two small children, I'm always like, 'okay, you have to understand their language', and it's the same sort of thing. But going back to that idea of writing Book Two versus Book One in the series, because I think there's a lot more we need to unpack there.

One of the things that you touched on is sort of this time compression that you suddenly have, where you're juggling both the promotion of Book One and the writing of Book Two. And, another element that I think was implied, but not explicit was the idea that you're probably were on a deadline for Book Two that you didn't have for Book One, because Book One, you didn't have like a editor waiting for it, right?

I would assume. How do you juggle those time constrains now that you're both being pulled in two different directions and you have a finite time period, when you have to hand in the book that you didn't have for Book One? What were some of the things you did to psych yourself up and actually get it done?

WM: Yeah, the first book, when I submitted it, it was accepted as a completed manuscript. And so most of the energy was put into editing that manuscript, while the second book was a proposal for a book; and essentially, the manuscript had to be written. So, for me, to get that done, to meet those deadlines, it was really creating those short-term deadlines for myself.

And, a lot of times, just showing up on a day-to-day basis, and giving it whatever it needs. And, that might be just an hour or two in the morning. But it's the consistency that I think allows the story to develop, where if I spend huge chunks of time or I wait for big chunks of time to appear in my schedule; one, they're very infrequent, and two, they're rarely as productive as I hope them to be where I find that if I'm consistent--

And, I really try to use the mornings as much as possible in writing the second book; if I'm consistent showing up, there's something, that extra energy that sometimes has to appear when you've taken a break from a manuscript for a while. You don't need that. You have the momentum of the previous day, and you work with it and within it.

For me, also I, in the middle of writing the second book, speaking of young ones, was born, my first kid. So, that was a total recalibration, is he was born, I think about a month before one of the major deadlines. And, honestly, I was just sort of honoring when I worked the best and being consistent about showing up at that time. That made it possible forward to meet those deadlines.

GP: I so can relate to that because when I finally sold the DIY MFA book, which was written on a proposal, because it was nonfiction. It was literally a few months after my daughter was born. And so it was like the same kind of thing where like, you know, juggling the two things. It really was about having consistency and finding that rhythm that you could just, sort of-- It's like riding the wave.

And, once you get yourself in that rhythm, it's easier to stay with that momentum as opposed to like, if you have to rev up your engine from zero and sit down and pumble through however many thousands of words in a day. Like, that never would've happened. I would've told totally never made that deadline.

It's interesting also, what you were saying about writing a completed manuscript versus a proposal, and then having that deadline; since I've never actually submitted something from a completed manuscript yet. It's always been on proposal because it's been nonfiction. I'm slightly terrified.

Like, how do you actually finish that first book? Because for me, it's like, I live by those deadlines. If I don't have that deadline and I don't know that my editor's going to be there really cranky if I don't hand in the book, it's really hard to write it. So, how do you motivate yourself on the first book to get it done?

WM: I think you got to be somewhat delusional.

[laughter]

WM: Someone is going to read this and that it's actually a good book. So, it was that feeling that there was a story here that I needed to write, that I needed to finish, that I used. That first book, it took years and I would have people read it and I would re-edit it. And, I was almost about to publish it, self-publish it, when about a week before I was supposed to self-publish it, an agent picked it up.

And then, after the agent picked it up, it took another year before Sleeping Bear picked it up. So, sometimes you need to just have a false sense of what you're actually doing to get it done. And, it's that false sense that then allows you it to move forward. And, when the reality starts to set in; if I ever knew, if I ever had realized how many challenges I would've had to overcome to get the book to press, I don't know if I could have done that.

GP: I love that. You know, another interesting angle going back to that idea of like writing Book Two versus Book One, and getting that momentum, is also that tricky aspect around the aesthetic of it,

right? Like when you're writing a series, especially for Middle Grade readers, I mean Middle Grade, you know, young like pre-teenagers, right? Like 8 to 12-year-olds, or 8 to 10-year-olds; they're going to want a lot of consistency.

Like, if they know that they have their author that they love; like they're R. L. Stine fans, they know what an R. L. Stine book is. And, now they're a William Meyer fan; they know what a William Meyer book is. So, how do you give them something that's the same, but also completely different and new and keeps them at the edge of their seat? Like, how do you juggle that tug of war between those two aspects?

WM: Yeah, that's so interesting because one of the best parts of writing a book is actually the school visits and engaging with readers and meeting them, and listening to their questions and hearing their ideas. I remember getting a young reader who gave me a draft of a prequel for the series that he had written; and actually had some really good ideas. [laughs]

GP: That's awesome.

WM: I was like, 'oh, this is brilliant. If I have to write a prequel, this is so good; some good stuff.'

GP: You already have a super fan writing you Fan Fiction. That is amazing.

WM: [laughs] Yeah. It's pretty funny. It is pretty inspiring and that's actually great motivation. And actually, I just gave him an early copy of the second book, and he was thrilled. He stopped by-- The great thing about being in a school is, I teach in a high school, but it's a K-12 school though, everyone's in the same building. And, this young man, he's like in fourth grade, he comes by in the afternoon, and I'd given him the book in the morning; he already had two or three ideas about what I need to do for the third book.

[laughter]

WM: So, that's pretty funny, but I think one of the key things to building that consistency is the consistency of the characters and the consistency-- While I think it's important for them to evolve the way they act and their experience, or sort of their actions and experience needs to be consistent, particularly, when you're dramatically changing the setting.

And while the hometown of Niles is the same place, although exhibits are discovered in the second book, rather than going back to Ancient Egypt, the second one; they head back to Detroit, the 1920s. So, there's a dramatic shift in some of those peripheral characters and the settings. I think it's the consistency of who those characters are at heart that allows this story to hold up and to deliver for the expectations of those young readers.

GP: That's fantastic. That's such a great insight too. And, you see it play out even in series for adults, right, where you have like, kind of the traveling episodic narrative, sort of like the Murder, She Wrote equivalent, like wherever Angela Lansbury's character shows up, that's where the story happens and the peripheral characters change. But we always have that consistency of like this one or couple of characters that go from place to place; kind of like the A-Team also.

WM: Yeah.

[laughter]

GP: Not to like--

WM: We do.

GP: -nerd out over like 1980 stuff, but it's great. This segues beautifully into what I wanted to ask you about with the setting, because it's a dramatically different setting for the bulk of the second book than what it was for the first book. So, can you tell us why you chose this time period? I'm assuming there's a connection between the two, if so, what is it? Can you share that with us?

WM: Well, there's just so many incredible connections. And, as I was writing that first book, I was stumbling upon all these really wild connections between Detroit and Ancient Egypt. I think the biggest connection between that period of time or those two periods of time; well, I know historically, it's the discovery of King Tutankhamun, which occurs right at the birth of the 1920s. That discovery has a huge impact on that period of time.

I would like to think in some ways, it's almost like literally a portal's open. We sometimes think of time moving along these linear, these lines, I should say; when in fact, I think it would probably be more accurate to say it's moving in cycles and spirals. And, sometimes those spirals overlap.

And to me, there was something about the 1920s, and particularly, what was happening in Detroit that paralleled with that 18th dynasty and what was happening back in Egypt in that period when King Tutankhamun's father existed, because they were creating a new city, a new world in that 18th dynasty.

And, in many ways, in Detroit in the 20s, they were creating a new world as well. And, they would have huge-- What happened in that period of time would have huge impacts on the next 100 years and beyond. And, what was also so striking is once I had made that decision; it was as if the veil had been lifted.

And, the number of connections between Detroit and Egypt were the type of things that give you goosebumps. I discovered a Scarab Club had been formed in 1907 as sort of a guardian of the arts of the city. And they had just built the new headquarters in 1925. There is a Scarab of Stout Car that was developed at the same time. The Guardian Building was full of all this art deco, and Egyptian iconography and symbolism in the city.

And then the most striking thing of all, which really inspired me more than anything in the second book, is when I went out to Woodlawn Cemetery in Detroit, where a lot of the individuals, the people from the 1920s, were buried; and I discovered the tomb of the Dodge Brothers in the back of that cemetery. And, it was this haunting Egyptian-style Mausoleum with two sphinxes guarding it.

Of course, the names of the Dodge brothers are John and Horace Dodge; and they're from Niles, Michigan. So, for me, the story just sort of unfolded naturally; and Detroit was that next piece along this narrative arc and thread that stand thousands of years.

I guess, that's an answer also to the consistency, but while something, the setting could be so different; in fact, they're very much connected, and they're very much connected to the same ideas and the same efforts to birth something new that was taking place in both Egypt in the 18th Dynasty and Detroit in the 20s.

GP: That's fantastic. And, this also ties into another element in the story, sort of that, I don't want to call it fantasy or magic, but there is a magical element, right? Like, I mean, they're traveling through time; they're going through portals. There's some sort of fantastic element in the story.

And it's interesting, a lot of times people think of like Sci-Fi and Fantasy and Historical Fiction as being dramatically different. I actually see them as being very closely connected because the worlds-building component is so fundamental to all of those different genres. So, can you talk a little bit about the sort of nuts and bolts of--

Like, you talked about the world-building in terms of the historical side, but in terms of like the fantastic and magical elements, like, did you have to-- How did you figure out the rules for how these portals worked and the mechanics of this time travel? Because there are different ways that, you know, people can write time travel. Like, there's the Marty McFly method in a DeLorean; and then there's the, you know, Scarab Beetle portal method. So, how did you come up with this, and sort of keep that consistency across the series?

WM: Yeah, that's a real challenge for me, because for me, when I'm looking at history, I do think there's a component of magic and history. I mean, I believe in magic; and while time travel might seem-- Although, even when we look at the science behind it, it's actually not that far-fetched, but we build these worlds in our mind and we move to different places, the past and the future, constantly in our thoughts.

But when you're writing, there does have to be a consistency and an order to this magical component of the universe you're building. I think there are just some key pieces. And, to me, the portals were going to be fixed objects from one time to another time and place. While like the DeLorean back to the future, could go anywhere at any time, which is very different.

So, the portals to me were like that subway map; and there were fixed lines and fixed structure to it. And I had to work from that and work from that outward. The other really magical component to the story besides the Scarab Beetle, which sort of opens these worlds is the Benben Stone, which is this object of power.

The kind of crazy part about it is the Benben Stone was a real stone, and it existed within the city of Heliopolis. And in the city of Heliopolis in Ancient Egypt, those priests were called the "Keepers of Time". So, there's a lot of parallels in that. It was my own wondering of what that object of power could represent; and how an object, a physical object, like a stone could hold memory.

And I think we actually still believe in that, not just a little bit, but a lot, within our own modern world, if we're not totally aware of it, but this idea that; 'objects hold memories, stones hold memories; they exist far, far longer'. There's an immortal aspect of these stones that sort of come from the beginning of time.

And, in the Ancient world, there was these objects that came from space were almost magical in their power, these media rights, is something like the Benben Stone would've been. It's keeping those rules very simple but consistent that's so important. And, at times, it would be my work and my editor, who would actually call me on the inconsistency of it that I myself didn't realize.

And, I think having that extra set of eyes that is focusing on that piece is so important because as a writer, we can sometimes bend for, not realize when we're being inconsistent with our own sort of logic, in order, particularly, when it comes to magic. So, having someone else really helped me, and I think can help most people.

GP: You know, it's interesting also, like, definitely having the second set of eyes is important, but there's also like an additional component, like with the magic that there's a consistency to it, but like you said, there are different styles or ways that the magic can operate.

And like, it's very easy for us to be in the thick of it; and very tempting for us to go, 'oh, wait, I need to get this character'. Or like, 'I need to unpaint myself from this corner, throw magic at it.' And, then all of a sudden, it doesn't stay consistent with the rules. In some ways, it's almost harder to write the magic part because you're creating the rules, but then you actually have to stick to the rules you've created.

WM: Definitely, definitely. I think, for me, the magic is just like 10% of the story. And, it is the, probably something that, it's the most challenging 10% of the story. I really believe like the history and the historical aspects of this, and I did a lot of research for both books, are magical in their own writing; in many ways, more amazing than something I could come up with. And, the real challenge too, is how you blend that piece of the story in with the magic so you're not losing really what's just amazing history that exists so that the reader can pick up on that history as well.

GP: And, the additional challenge, I think as well, is that as a writer, we have to know how the magic works, and like the nice cities and all those details, but we can't info-dump that on the reader. Like, you know, if we look at, you know, for a famous example of a magic-driven story, like the Harry Potter series, very rarely does J. K. Rowling sit the reader down and go, "This is how magic works in the magical world, and these are all the rules."

We get it through seeing the kids in their classes and seeing them, you know, oftentimes trying to figure out how to get out of a magical problem and then, you know, learn how the magic operates in that way. So, it's interesting too, like that fine line of navigating both knowing all those rules and keeping them straight, but then also not dumping it all on the reader because that would bore them to tears.

WM: Yeah, that is a real challenge. I remember once watching, it must have been a documentary, on Back to the Future. They were talking about how they had to sort of navigate the logistics of the DeLorean, but it's the same as how sort of Harry Potter navigates the logistics of sort of massive magical world. It's one of those things where you know it, you don't want to tell it, you sort of want to show it; and it will reveal itself in time and in the right places. I think trusting that and trusting the narrative in that way is important.

GP: You know, it's interesting that you said that. The great thing, the way with the Back to the Future thing; I think it's not really a cheat, but sort of like the little technique there is having that mentor character in the professor. And, having him like, you know, whenever Marty's got like something, like, why did it, you know, why did this one change in the past suddenly skew us off into this alternate version of the present and blah, blah, blah? And like, then the professor's like, "I can explain it."

And, he steps up and he draws this little diagram on his chalkboard, and then it's like, oh. You can totally tell-- Me, as an adult, now watching that scene, like, I can totally tell like, 'oh, the writers needed to convey this information to the viewers'. But when I was watching that as a teenager, I was just like sucked into the story and being like, 'yeah, I need to know, like, why are we in this weird alternate history where Biff is, you know, the ruler of the universe?'

WM: Right, right. I think it's that, that's when it's well-done; when, as a reader, you can't see it. I think that's the challenge writing anything; you want to honor that perspective, but you're also sort of in the meta part of it, where you figure out how to get these key components communicated to the reader without making a, like a lecture. Exactly.

GP: Exactly. And, oftentimes, having-- I mean, this is one of the great things about Middle Grade is that when you have kids who are-- Kids are natural learners. And so when the protagonists are kids, that automatically gives you an opportunity for them to learn stuff. And therefore, the reader can learn that same information because the characters in the story are learning how it works.

And especially when they're in a 'fish out of water' situation, like if they're plunked into another time; all of a sudden, they need to figure out how they got there and how that new time operates, and what that world is like. And that's an opportunity for the writer to weave in that information without just plopping it down in a chapter long info-dump on the reader.

WM: Yeah. And, what's great when you have a really good editor too, is sometimes there's pieces that I've forgotten to include that it's, while in my own mind, 'oh yeah, this is what allows for this to happen, or this is why they're there'; that's where you need someone else also to not just what you're communicating, but what you're forgetting to communicate.

The original manuscript, I think when I submitted it was something like 60,000 words; and when it was published, it was 40,000. That was probably pretty comparable to what happened with the second manuscript.

And, when you're making that kind of edits and you're streamlining story that significantly, there is a danger of, you're cutting out chunks, sometimes whole scenes; how do we communicate the information that was in the scene that was removed so that it still exists in the story, because that's a crucial component to understanding this other piece?

And, having another set of eyes as well in that situation is so important because it's-- As a writer, you've internalized it, you know it, and written it; sometimes you forget, 'oh, that was also removed. That was kind of thrown out when that piece was cut out.' So, that's a challenge as well.

GP: I bet. And, another thing that I'd love to unpack is the fact that this is a Middle Grade book, so the characters are, you know, 10 or 11 years old; or sixth grade, I guess are 11 or 12. And there's definitely a challenge when writing middle grade where you need to both give the characters agency, but it also needs to be realistic. And so there's that tug of war. I know because back in the day when I was writing fiction, primarily, I wrote mostly middle grade fiction.

And the tug of war I often felt, was people saying, "This is too scary." Like, no one would ever love their kid, just run away from home in 2017 or whatever, like that would never happen, but you kind of have to get the kids out on their own so that they can do the adventures and all this crazy stuff can happen.

And, you have to let them be the sort of masters of their own fate in the story. So, how did you navigate this? I mean, obviously, there's a lot of danger involved. They're traveling through time and space. How did you navigate both the, keeping it grounded in some semblance of realism or like, you know, suspension of disbelief with the present, but also giving the characters agency?

WM: Not always, well, to be honest. [laughs] And, I think that probably is because our own lived experience when we were kids, is so different from what exists for a lot of kids today; around play dates and highly structured time. And, creating realistic spaces for them that could play in a novel like this, while also giving in those spaces the opportunity for them to explore, is challenging.

I think a lot about do pieces, Stranger Things, I think on Netflix and then just the remake of it; and how in many ways, it sort of has this nostalgia for the kids riding around in bikes, discovering the world.

And, for a lot of kids today, that just doesn't exist. So, I, at times struggled with that. The advantage of being in a school is it really did help ground me because I am surrounded by these young kids, and I can hear their voices and hear their conversation and watch what they're are doing.

While these huge swaths of time in the afternoon or on the weekends where they're out on their own exploring don't exist, there are moments. And, I think taking those smaller moments and using them, are so key. And, whether it's like a moment where the characters are talking in the library, or it's a moment right before school, or a moment after school; I tried to work with sort of those shoulder times or those fringe moments that didn't necessarily require a massive chunk of time and space of time, but it was enough for them to discover something.

And, that's really a shift-- In the beginning in some of the earlier drafts I had, you know, it was my wife who's like, 'kids would never have an opportunity to do this stuff'. You know, parents would not let them ride their bikes away for like hours and hours and hours on end without questioning what was going on. And so I had to rein that in, and work more with the norms of the modern world; not even my own experience as a kid, and that was, you know, 30 years ago, but that is probably what's shifted and changed the most.

GP: Yeah, totally. You know, it's interesting also, like it kind of even seeps into the magical elements of the world, right? Like you had to factor that time is going to move differently. Because if they go into these portals and they're there for, you know, weeks or however long, they're there doing their adventures, there has to be an explanation for why their parents didn't like put on Amber alert.

WM: No one's getting out of their house. Yeah, exactly. You're going to have Amber alerts; the whole town will be locked down and that's where the story ends, basically.

[laughter]

GP: So, it's interesting how all these considerations have to like filter into even the world-building elements of the story, which to me, is fascinating, like from a craft perspective. So, what is next for you? Is there a Book Three in the Timekeepers series in the works that you can tell us about, or should we be on the look-out for something new from you in the next year or so?

WM: Yeah, that's great. Well, there's definitely quite a few things. One of the pieces that came out of the second book, in the second book is a reference to a ghost story at Niles. And when my publishers sat, they immediately asked me to put together a proposal for an anthology of ghost stories that middle grade readers would be interested across the whole state of Michigan. So, I put together that proposal.

So, that is definitely something that we're looking at. I actually also put together a proposal and signed a book deal with a non-fiction publisher, New World Library over a Meditation in the Classroom book. In fact, that's also something that's in the work. So, as you were mentioning, those non-fiction pieces at the beginning of our conversation, I was taking notes on that, because that's basically what I was at. It's totally different format.

As you know, you put forth the proposal; you might have a chapter or two written, but nothing like a completed manuscript. This can sometimes be required in middle grade works. So, yeah, and I'm hoping we've got a lot of exciting things coming with the second book, a big launch party here in Westchester, New York in just a few days. We're doing a big event in Detroit, actually at the Scarab Club and connected to the Detroit Institute of Art, our tour--

We're actually doing a bus tour of sites from the book for some 50-plus educators. And then we're doing a pretty there, and some school visits in Michigan. So, I'm hoping that we get the same response with the second book that we've had with the first on, and Sleeping Bear is excited.

I've already outlined the third book. I'll just wait for their go-ahead. But there's a lot of exciting pieces. And, with younger readers too, you know, you kind of want to keep moving on momentum because they grow up faster sometimes than you're able to write. And, that's an important piece to keep them engaged.

GP: Absolutely. And, young readers can also be voracious readers. Like I remember as a kid, I fell in love with a couple of authors, William and Lois Duncan. I literally in like a period of a few weeks, read everything they had written because I was obsessed. And you know, so, like, when you have that kind of voracious readership and you have these kids that are diehard fans who are writing you Fan Fiction, you kind of need to keep feeding that fire, right?

WM: It's so true. It's so true. You got to-- You just got to keep it going. Absolutely.

GP: So, I always end every interview with the same question. What's your number one tip for writers?

WM: I think, for me, it's just, you need to show up. It's just, you got to show up. It's like swimming. I think the hardest part about swimming or going into the pool is just jumping in the water. And, often, when I swim, once I get in the water, I always feel great; when I'm done, I feel so good. And, the same is true of writing. It's just sitting down and showing up and being consistent about that. If you make that space, then there's space for the magic and the rest takes care of itself; but you got to show up.

GP: That is fantastic. I couldn't have said it better myself. Thank you so much for being on the show, Bill. This has been a blast talking to you.

WM: Oh, absolutely. I've actually learned so much, and really appreciate this space and the opportunity to connect with other writers and have these conversations.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.