diyMFA

Megan Dowd Lambert

95: Reading Picture Books with Children

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.

Hey, Hey, word nerds. Gabriela here, and before we dive into today's interview, I wanted to tell you about something really cool that we have coming up at DIY MFA. As you probably already know, the DIY MFA book comes out in late June, early July. And to celebrate this monumentous event, I am doing an extra special free online event called The Storytelling Superpower Summit.

This event, which first started off being more like a podcast series is actually going to be an in-depth, week-long online Masterclass, where you'll get a video every single day for a week on this topic of The Storytelling Superpower. The idea behind this summit is to help you harness the skills that you are already good at as a writer, and use those skills to improve your writing and to also get your book published.

So, I hope you will join me for the DIY MFA Storytelling Superpower Summit, and you can sign up for this awesome event over at diymfa.com/summit. Also, if you want to find out what your storytelling superpower is, take the quiz over at diymfa.com/stsp, which stands for Storytelling Superpower. Now, here's our interview.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and I am so excited for today's interview. Before we dive in, I just want to remind you that the show notes will be over at diymfa.com/095, because guess what? It's Episode 95. We are almost at the big 100; I'm so excited.

So, today, I am thrilled to interview Megan Dowd Lambert, who is the author of Reading Picture Books with Children and a children's literature expert. She's actually the person who's developed the Whole Book Approach to reading and story time. So, a little bit about Megan.

She is a senior lecturer at Simmons College, where she earned her master's degree in children's literature after doing a B.A. at Smith. We both went to college in Western Mass; so, woo-hoo! And then she writes for Horn Book Magazine, and served on the 2011 Caldecott committee. If you don't know what Caldecott is, it's basically the biggest prize you can get in picture books, in the Picture Book universe.

So, that's pretty awesome that she was part of helping to select those nominees and award winners. She's also worked at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art for many years. And this is where she's led Whole Book Approach and trained other people in those methods as well.

She's the author of a book called Reading Picture Books with Children, which we'll be talking about more in the episode, but she's also just written a picture book called Real Sisters Pretend. She's the mother of six children and she lives with her family in Amherst, Mass. So, welcome, Megan. It's so thrilling to have you on the show.

Megan Dowd Lambert: Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here.

GP: So, let's just dive right on in. I think the title of your book is kind of the crux of your philosophy. That's really what it all comes down to. And so can you tell us why is it Reading Picture Books with Children, and not say 'to children' or 'for children'?

MDL: Yeah, so it really helps to crystallize a shift in my own thinking about story time. I started off reading with my son who's now 18. I loved reading with him at home and it was always very interactive; and we'd flip back and forth, and talk about the pictures. And then I started working in a public library, and I would choose a theme and I would read stories around that theme to the group.

What I noticed was a real disconnect between what I did at home with my son and what I was doing in the library with kids. At the library, I was performing the stories; I was a storyteller, and there was nothing wrong with that. We had a lot of fun. I kind of drew on my underground theater experiences that I had as a teenager.

And to some extent, in college I revived those and just tried to entertain everybody. But when I started working for the Carle as a graduate student, I thought to myself, "But wait a minute; I shouldn't just be putting on a show, I should be engaging kids with art." And I realized that what I was doing at home with my son was much closer to what I wanted to achieve on behalf of the Carle.

I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with a performance-based story-time at all. I think there is great value to that and, who doesn't love a well-told story? But with the Whole Book Approach, what I try to do is shift away from performance and into more of book discussion at story-time. So that it's an experience of reading 'with children' as opposed to 'to children'.

And in that sense, children are less an audience at Whole Book Approach story-times than they are co-collaborators in making meaning of art and design and text while we all share a book together.

GP: I love that. You know, it's interesting, there was a great quote in your book; something along the lines of, you know, "when you're reading with children, you don't have to worry about crowd control". And I definitely, I have two very small children right now. My son is four and my daughter's almost two. And so I definitely can relate to like, you know, going and visiting my son's classroom.

And sometimes it feels like reading-time or story-time is crowd-control. It's like, how do you keep, you know, 20 4-year-olds with their bottoms, you know, in the circle. And I think that shift in mindset of like reading with them, the minute you get that engagement, then it's not about controlling. It's about engaging, and it's totally different environment.

MDL: Yeah. It is very different. I mean, a lot of what I've learned about leading story-time with kids, comes out of parenting. And I know as a mother that you can better kind of direct your children toward what you want them to be doing if you engage them, instead of just, you know, tell them what to do. And so you kind of get controlled by giving control; you say, "We're in this together, basically."

And so instead of, at story-time, instead of being like, "All eyes on me", and, you know, "Quiet mouths and quiet hands and stay still". Instead, it just became about like, "Oh, I love this book so much. Let's share it together. And, what are your ideas and what do you see happening in this picture?"

And then it became my job to facilitate that. To me, facilitation is different than management. Facilitation is about kind of bringing the group into the experience as opposed to management,

which felt more like I'm calling the shots. Instead with facilitation, you know, to borrow from, I was letting the kids drive the bus.

You know, I might have been kind of making sure that everyone was, you know, able to participate, I guess. But that's what I see facilitation as kind of enabling a large group to participate together as opposed to managing and keeping attention on me.

GP: I wholeheartedly, wholeheartedly agree. So, I've studied children's literature. I have an MFA in Children's Writing. You've dedicated your life to studying children's literature and developing these methods. So, clearly the two of us, we know that there is value, that there's incredible merit and importance to children's literature, but it's not necessarily the case for a lot of people in the writing world.

In fact, as an MFA student, it sometimes felt like we were kind of the side-track of the MFA and not quite as real literature as like the more serious genres. And so I was wondering like, why-- I mean, if you had to spell it out, why is children's literature so important?

MDL: Well, it's one of the things that brought me to Simmons as a student and why I love teaching there; is that at Simmons because our program is wholly focused on children's and Young Adult literature, no one ever has to apologize for it. You never feel like you're the, I didn't quite catch the phrase you used, but like you're the 'not a serious track'.

We are engaged in the serious consideration of children's literature all the time as scholars, as writers. I guess, so it's therefore, a little bit hard for me to come up with kind of children's literature apologetics, because I never have to do that in my day job.

But I guess children's literature is so important because children are important, because, why would we look at this category of literature that implies its audience in its very name and say that it's any less? It's the literature that introduces us as human beings to the realm of literature; and in the case of the picture book, to the realm of visual art.

And so I think it's important that that introduction take its audience seriously, and that we in turn take children's literature as a field seriously. It's there for entertainment, certainly; but it's also there for engagement with the bigger ideas about what makes us human, and how we express things that are important to us and questions that we have. And, that can all come in story-time too.

When I read story-time, yes, we're reading the text; and yes, we're engaging with the art and the design. But what happens when you have kind of a co-constructive dialogic reading of a picture book is that you get to see what the children bring to the table, and their ideas and their questions.

So, I always say to my students, when I talk about this, that I don't believe that meaning resides in the text or in the art alone, and nor do I believe it resides in the reader to borrow from reader-response criticism, and transactional theory in particular, meaning resides in the space between the reader and the book.

And, that's why we can all come to a book with a different reading. My job as facilitator in a story-time is to enable those different readings to come into contact and consideration with one another.

GP: That's fantastic. It's interesting because I approach it sort of more from the writing side of things since I teach a lot of writers and I've, you know, been focused on writing and producing books, children's books; at least, in the MFA program.

And my experience has always been that when I ask writers, why they want to write or what's inspired them to write, I'd say about 90% of the time, their reason for loving books and loving writing is something that happened as a child, usually having to do with discovering a particular book as a child. And that, that connection with that book has then spurred them to want to write and to want to do that. And, that was my own experience as a kid. I became a writer in our school library, once upon a time, when I was in first grade.

I think those experiences that we have with those very first books that we read are so powerful; and they have the ability to really lay the foundation for a love of reading, and also a love of writing and literature as a whole. So, I think it's just, I couldn't be more like, you know, gung-ho fan of children's literature, but I just loved-- I love finding other like-minded people. So, that's awesome.

MDL: Yeah. I mean, what's that old line, I'm probably butchering it, but 'the first cut is the deepest'; that, you know, our first encounters leave an impression on us. It becomes a touchstone. And so I think we're developing taste. We're developing an identity as readers, as viewers of art in our childhood, ideally. I think we have to remember, you know, when we talk about childhood, it's not a universal state.

There are certainly plenty of kids who don't have these experiences of going to story-time, or encountering literature and art at home. But for those who do, and I think we have to do a lot of work to make sure that it becomes more universal; it is transformative. It is foundational. It can create those creative impulses and those critical thinking foundations that can serve you for an entire lifetime.

GP: Absolutely. That's one of the reasons why I'm such a strong believer and supporter of, you know, organizations that help bring that contact with children's books. I mean, I participated--

I used to teach a workshop at Everybody Wins!, where they pair kids in New York City with adult mentors to do story-time; and also the 826 organizations across a country that, you know, help connect kids with literature, with writers and sort of build those foundations. I mean, it's a testament to how powerful children's literature can be, that there are these organizations trying to make it more of a universal experience; so, definitely a very brilliant thing.

MDL: Absolutely. Mm-hmm, absolutely.

GP: Let's shift gears a little bit and talk about your Whole Book Approach. And I know you've written a whole book about it, so we don't have to like go through all the details, but can you tell us a little bit of how it came about? I think you've already touched on that, but also dig into like, what a story-time would look like. Like, how do you actually present a book as, you know, this engagement level, a facilitator; as opposed to a performer?

MDL: Sure. I started to develop the Whole Book Approach when I was still a graduate student at Simmons; and I had begun work on behalf of the Carle in its then Information Office. This was back in the year 2001 before the Carle had even opened. What I did, was I took my graduate study of the picture book as a visual art form and tried to bring it into story-time.

And I started very simply by just sharing end-papers with kids and saying, "These are the end-papers, those pages that get pasted down to the inside of the board of a cover, and then sometimes extend outward onto the flyleaf." What I said to kids was, "You know, end-papers sometimes give us clues about a story or about the illustration. So, what do you see here?"

And I started to refine my approach to questioning when I learned about Visual Thinking strategies, which is the approach that the Carle was adopting to use in its galleries. Visual Thinking strategies

takes the usual docent model of a gallery, and turns it on its head. Instead of having an expert stand in front of a work of art and tell a group about it, the docent will ask the group about it.

Not in a way that is like an art history quiz, but in an open-ended Inquiry-Based Approach. So that in a gallery, the question about a painting would be, 'what do you see happening in this picture', and then, 'what do you see that makes you say that'; which grounds the group in evidentiary thought in critical thinking. And then the next question is, what else can we find, which invites further examination of the work of art.

And so I knew I couldn't take those questions and apply them to every picture in a picture book that that would take forever; and it would not be fun. But I knew I could take that Inquiry-Based Approach and apply it to book design elements. Just by saying, these are the end-papers. End-papers can give us clues, what do you see here? Or, if the end-papers were just a given color to invite children to consider, why that color?

Let's look back at the jacket, can you make a color connection? Can you make a match? And when I started to do that, what I realized was that I was seeing things that I'd never noticed in picture books before, because truthfully, I'm not a very strong visual thinker initially. I need to really work hard. I learn better through my ears, but when I started to stretch myself and think with my eyes, I was discovering new things; particularly, when I welcome children's responses.

And those responses would often have insights, not just into formal elements of art, but into story and into, like I said, some of the bigger questions that we grapple with as human beings; let alone as just children. And so it became very rewarding. And the children who came to my story-times on a regular basis, started to integrate vocabulary from book design into their own lexicon.

And so they would say, "Oh, look how that picture crosses the gutter", or "Go back to those end-papers". And these were three-year-olds because my idea had always been, you know, if three-year-olds could learn all the names of the dinosaurs, then why not give them book terminology too.

GP: Absolutely.

MDL: And so, yeah-- And so this kind of interactive Art & Design-based approach to story-time was working. And so as it started to really work and gain an audience, and I started to have teachers and librarians ask me about it, I thought, "Well, I better articulate what it is that I'm doing."

And so I went backwards and I said, "Okay, we're going to start with dialogic reading. We're going to start with a critical approach to the picture book as an art form, we're going to value what children have to say and bring that to the center." That's where the Whole Book Approach became an approach that I defined, and started to train teachers and librarians in practicing.

GP: That's fantastic. You know, one of the things that I think is so great is how it really honors the kids as being smart and perceptive, you know?

MDL: Yeah.

GP: I find that so many times in our culture, there's sort of this culture of dumbing things down; and I've always been completely against that. I mean, I've been known to teach workshops and poems in workshops with like seven-year-olds that I would use with like graduate students.

So, that in my mind has always been totally normal to expect like young kids to think at the same level, just maybe not quite in the same sort of expanse as adults, but that they can grapple with the same topics and same concepts. So, that to me, is just exactly in line with my approach and with DIY MFA as a whole.

So, when you go through the approach-- I mean, one of the things I love about this book is how it, you know, there's that old cliché, 'show don't tell', in the book, does actually do that. It shows and doesn't tell. Like, we have all these annotations in the margins that show us the terminology.

And, I think that is just so cool. So, did you have-- I mean, as a design geek, I'm like loving this, but did you have-- How much control did you have over that? Because I know the reality for a lot of writers is you hand your manuscript into the editor, and then they kind of do with it what they will.

MDL: Well, I was so lucky to sign with Charlesbridge. Charlesbridge is an incredible small publisher with just such a collaborative approach to work. And I had that experience, not only with this book, but with my first picture book, A Crow of His Own, which Charlesbridge also published last year. But with this book, I mean, we knew the stakes were high; that a book about design and engaging people with design had to be well-designed.

And luckily, Susan Sherman, who is a designer at Charlesbridge was not only really visionary in her approach, but she also invited my input. One thing that I requested was that we do this kind of meta-approach to teaching about book design, that we would have these--

It looks like it's hand-lettered annotations in the margins and all over the pages so that if you take the jacket off the book and look at the case-wrap; the title is pointed out, the subtitle, and so on. And then you go into the body of the book and we continue to do that on the interior pages. I had a colleague who lifted the book and she said, "My copy's all marked up." And I said, "Yeah, that's intentional."

[laughter]

MDL: And, in that way, the book is showing, not just telling; and I hope that that is going to be an exciting way for people to engage with these design elements.

GP: I mean, when I look at it, I look at like what I wish my design textbooks had been, you know? Like, it's just, it conveys the information, but in a way that also shows us what it means as opposed to just like telling us what it means. I mean, it's always surprised me, like how some design textbooks are so poorly designed.

MDL: Right?

GP: That's a topic for a whole other podcast, but it's kind of amazing, right? Like you see these design textbooks and you're like, "Really, guys? You couldn't have designed something better?" So, anyway-- Oh, go ahead.

MDL: Well, we were really lucky also that Laura Vaccaro Seeger, a Children's Book illustrator and author agreed to do the jacket art and did such an eye-catching, wonderful design for that. And then when Jerry Pinkney blurbed the book and he highlighted the book's design; I mean, I just thought, "Okay, we got it right. We really nailed it." I felt that before anyone else had any feedback, but I knew, you know, I was very close to the project, obviously. And so it was good to have that external validation come in.

GP: Absolutely. So, when it came to-- You know, as I've mentioned, this book has a very sort of personal tie to me because I have such a strong passion for design. And, I see like-- I see storytelling as, in a way, a kind of experiential design; like you're creating an experience inside the reader's head, whether you are creating it with pictures and with words, or just with words on the page, as you're creating, you know, a novel. It's still, you're designing an experience. It's not the same as, you know, a television show or a movie or something like that. And so how do you see the Whole Book Approach method? Like, do you see it expanding beyond picture books, because I could totally see it expanding beyond picture books?

MDL: Yeah. I mean, I think it has a relationship with other modes of inquiry-based instruction. So, if I think of in children's literature Aidan Chambers work with his 'Tell me' approach to engaging kids and talking about books; it has some things in common with it, where, yes, we acknowledge that meaning resides, as I said before, in the space between the reader and the text.

So, the author, the illustrator is creating something to provoke a response, and that provocation-- I mean, there's another reader response. There is Stanley Fish who talks a text harassing you to a certain interpretation. And then we get a question of the gulf that can exist between intention and execution; and also, what does the reader bring to the table? So that one text can provoke a multiplicity of responses.

And, with the Whole Book Approach or with reader response engagement with text, I think what we're aiming at is to enable and empower the reader to articulate her response to a text or to a work of art; and then to look at what in the text provoked it so that we do have this real strong dialogue between text and reader.

And ultimately, it can feel like between reader and author; so that when you engage with a text or with an illustration, you have a sense of a communion with that author, with that creator. Sometimes when I read an intricately-plotted book or I just marvel at someone's use of language, I can't help, but think about the writer and think that their mind created this.

You know, that there was a world that existed before this writer articulated something that's moved me so powerful and so powerfully. And I'm so glad that that world is gone now, that the writer found a way to say something that's moved me. That's what I mean by a text can provoke a communion.

It's an appreciation for the minds that created that work. But a text does not have one meaning, I really believe that. It often will have meanings that authors never intended. And, I find real excitement in that. And in empowering diverse voices of readers to say what they think about text and to create space for those readings and those interpretations.

GP: Absolutely. I think even just going to the more fundamental elements of like design and story, there are a lot of elements that I find-- I mean, I'm a total design geek, so I'm sort of biased; but I feel like having the language of design, made me a better writer. For instance, understanding concepts like closure; and understanding that like, there are elements in your story that do not appear on the page. And, you touch on this in the book where you use the example of the face of the teacher in Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?

MDL: Yeah.

GP: And how, like, just because we only see her face doesn't mean that like, you know, she's a floating head. Like, there's more person beyond that in kind of the conversations that you've drawn,

you know, that you drew out of kids around that picture. But I think that, like we could even expand that concept more broadly.

Like when you read a book, writers intentionally leave out things just as much as they put them in; and there's the negative space of the story, the stuff that happens between the words or outside of the scenes of the story that people sort of forget is there.

And so I find that having that language of design made me a better writer, I think, and also a better reader, because I'd start thinking beyond just the confines of the story itself and starting to think of like the whole universe that could be the world of the book. So yeah, like all of these concepts.

MDL: Yeah.

GP: I wish that like, they taught that more in literature classes because, anyway.

MDL: Yeah. Well, I think what you're talking about is more of a deconstructive approach; learning to listen to the silences as opposed to a structural approach, looking at what's there. Those silences can sometimes be intentional on the part of the author, and they are a real signal that the author is trusting the reader. In the picture book world, I think of Jon Klassen's books with their marvelous ambiguous endings that really trust the reader to say, "Well, did the bear eat that rabbit?" in I Want My Hat Back--

[laughter]

MDL: -and that leave the ending open. But I also think we have to attend to silences that may be unintentional but that expose ideological positioning; whose stories are told, whose stories aren't, whose voices are silenced?

And that's, you know, a question or a line of inquiry that I think is starting to be considered in mainstream publishing more and more with the, We Need Diverse Books movement so that we might have kind of a silencing of voices in our fields more generally, or in a particular text that we can attend to in order to think about maybe some unintended silences or some intentional ones that speak to power dynamics.

GP: Right. And that actually brings up a really interesting question because, you know, as someone who studied from the writing side, we were told like on Day One, "If you want to write picture books, you will have-- Unless you're an author-illustrator, you will have no control over who illustrates your book." And, you know, that tends to be, I'd say it's probably not universally true, but especially for debut authors, that tends to be the case.

So, let's suppose you do want to have diverse voices and diverse faces and imagery in your book; how does a writer convey that if they have no control over who's going to illustrate the book? I mean, you could imagine the book in your head having a very diverse group of people in it. And yet, the illustrator could, you know, to use the cliché term, like, 'whitewash' the story. So, how does one navigate that as an author?

MDL: Well, I remember reading about a case where a writer, I think it was Norma Simon wrote a picture book that she envisioned as kind of a 21st century or late 20th century depiction of a firehouse. She wanted women of color as firefighters. She wanted men of color. She wanted white women too. And then she got the book back and it was populated by Dalmations, anthropomorphic Dalmations.

[laughter]

MDL: And she thought, “Oh, well, that’s not what I envisioned.” But in terms of the author’s control of that-- I mean, one thing you can do is you can make your work culturally conscious instead of not having diversity on the page, in your text. You use language that specifies culture, and that’ll bring diversity into illustrations. Another thing you can do is use some illustration notes.

For example, in A Crow of His Own, not with regard to racial diversity but with another kind of inclusion, I really wanted the farmers in that story to be depicted as a gay couple. Farmer Kevin and Farmer Jay are not brothers.

They are not father and son. They are not friends, they’re partners. And so when I wrote the text, I said to Charlesbridge, “This is important to me. I don’t know how the artist is going to create this depiction of a couple, but I want it clear. I mean, slap a rainbow sticker on the back of the truck or do something that allows us to see them as a couple.” And ultimately, the artist did that; and it helped in that, in that case, the artist was a good friend of mine.

My experience as an author of picture books is a little bit different, I think because my publishers know my background in the study of picture books. I have been involved to some extent in, I wouldn’t say collaboration, but in contact with the illustrators. With my other picture book, Real Sisters Pretend, the story premised on the idea that there are two adopted sisters who look very different from one another.

And, they’re grappling with an outsider’s comment or question, are they real sisters? And, it’s based on a conversation that two of my daughters had years ago. And although it’s not a story specifically about them, when I was working with the publisher, I said, “It’s really important to me that these two little girls be children of color, of different races who don’t look alike because that element of my daughters’ story was what inspired the whole text.”

So, you can have some say, but I think making sure diversity is on the page in your text, is a starting point. Don’t leave it ambiguous if that’s important to you in the telling of your story.

GP: Absolutely. I love that. So, what other ways, I mean, you touched on kind of how your experience with developing this method has sort of seeped into your writing of picture books as well. Can you talk a little bit more about that? Like, how have you changed your approach to writing picture books? How has it affected you?

MDL: I mean, I came to picture book writing later than I came to my critical study of picture books. So, in some ways, sometimes I feel like as a creative writer, I have to work hard to get out of my left brain; and to not allow, you know, my thinking about the structure of story or, ‘oh, how might this design element impact that?’

I have to get away from that because otherwise, I think my writing creatively suffers in that initial stage when you’re just trying to get it out on the page. But, you know, once I have a manuscript that, you know, I’m working with an editor or I’m at a stage that is beyond the initial draft, then I feel like I can take my Whole Book Approach brain and apply it more thoughtfully.

So that, with Real Sisters Pretend I was working with the editor and the illustrator, Nicole Tadgell, to just see how we could have design enhance the telling of the story; and that text is written entirely in dialogue between the two sisters.

So, one thing we did was we decided that it was going to borrow from comic conventions and use some paneling and use speech balloons. We had the speech balloons color-coded so that it would be easier to tell which sister was speaking, and the color corresponds with the sisters' outfits. Mo Willems does this in his Elephant and Piggie books.

And so we were definitely inspired by that, but then also because the text is all dialogue, I wanted the text to be hand-lettered so that it would look more like spoken language. And, Nicole did a great job with all of those design elements.

GP: I love that. Before we wrap things up, I wanted to also ask you about like media and shifting media, because, you know, these days we see a lot of books being repurposed. You know, like, you'll see the Hungry Caterpillar goes from picture book to board book to stuffed animal to whole line of children's products. And like, you know, you'll see Curious George turns into a TV show and all these different; and books turn into apps. What's your feeling about these things? How do you feel about them?

MDL: Well, I think I have a lot of different feelings about that. On the one hand, I think that that has to do with branding and that if a book is successful, then-- I mean, publishing is a business, and you'll want to bring it out into different products that can tie in with the book and its success and its popularity.

The other thing I feel about that is that in the digital age, I see the Whole Book Approach as hopefully playing a part in really advocating and asserting the place of the codex, the printed-bound paper-book in the Digital Age to say, "You know, it's not just nostalgia or sentimentality that brings us back to the printed book; that books offer us something." I think they offer us a discreet reading experience.

Yes, we might read books on a digital platform, but no one really hugs a Kindle to their chest and says a, "Oh, I love this thing." You might love the story that your Kindle holds, but you might love the book, the codex book itself. I think that's because books don't just hold story and art, they hold memories of shared reading experiences; particularly, the picture books.

So that when you look at a picture book, you're not just remembering the story itself or the art itself; you're remembering reading it with someone. And, I think that's part of what the codex offers us.

GP: So, you know, from my perspective, I see there-- You know, from the design side, there's always been kind of two approaches; the like, you know, the whole form versus function. Like, is it all about--

MDL: Yeah.

GP: -delivering the same content or ideas in as many different ways as you can, or is there some kind of link between-- Like, does the idea have to change as you apply it to different media? I've always been very much of the like Marshall McLuhan, like 'medium is the message', 'form follows function'. Like, the story has to be--

Like, the medium has to elevate and respect the story. And, in my mind, a great example of this is the movie, The Wizard of Oz, where the fact that it went from black and white to color. And the moment that that happens is such a key moment in the story.

I mean, it's the point-of-no-return moment in the story trajectory. It's such a like impactful moment. And it was one of the very first, if not the first Color Picture, one of the very first. And so like the fact that that elevated the story or brought it to a new level, I think makes it, sort of justifies the medium. And I find that, I guess, my-- I agree with you in the sense that like, there's something very unique and special about the experience that people have with a book.

I also think like a lot of writers are scared of what digital or multimedia can do to books, but in a way, I kind of think of it as empowering the book because it makes us as writers and as readers sort of have to bring our A-Game to make the book form really show that it is deserving of a place among all the other media; and kind of makes us sort of stand up for it and advocate for it. So, that's sort of my take on the whole multimedia thing.

MDL: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I think that as eBook platforms continue to evolve, we'll be asking the same questions about, 'well, what makes a well-designed eBook, and why does this story need to be told on this platform?' Not, can it be, but why is it need this platform; the same way that we're asking these questions about picture books now in the digital age?

And so I think it gives room for two tracks to evolve. One track is going to be the ongoing publication of books that really value their materiality and make the most of their bookness or their thingness versus books that make the most of a digital platform.

I'm not really interested in, you know, picture book apologetics or something like that. I'm much more interested in thinking about how we can come to story and to art and to reader responses to them in different kinds of places. I'm excited about the potential that all of these different entry points have.

GP: Absolutely. I mean, you mentioned earlier, Mo Willems and his pigeon driving the bus book is such a great example of the use of the end-papers and the fact that the story starts on the title page and the copyright page; and like you've already got illustrations on those. And, you know, at one point, our son loved that book when he was two; and he was going to destroy it. Like, we had the whole beautiful picture book; it was actually a signed copy.

And, I was like, "I can't let my toddler, you know, destroy the signed copy that I have." So, we got like the really super-cheap paperback version. And, of course, that didn't have the end-papers. It didn't have-- It still had the story. And, you know, considering that it was like a couple of dollars, it was a worthy investment to have it so that my son could destroy it.

But I think that understanding that there's a place for every different version and that they're serving different jobs within like the reader experience, I think is really important. Like, I don't think it's an either/or issue. I think it's sort of a, there's that room for everyone at the table question.

MDL: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

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

MDL: Read.

[laughter]

MDL: I think if you want to be a writer, you need to read not only to know the market that you're trying to enter, so reading contemporary stuff; but read what came before you, read to find out what isn't out there that you could uniquely contribute. Read to support other writers. Read to amplify-- Read and respond to amplify voices that are silenced. Read, read, read, read, read; that's my advice.

GP: I love it. It's a piece of advice that comes up again and again on this podcast, but I think it should because it's really good advice.

MDL: Yeah.

GP: Well, thank you so much for being on the show. This was a blast chatting with you today.

MDL: Thank you so much. It was really fun.

GP: All right, word nerds. Remember the show notes are over at diymfa.com/095. Keep writing and keep being awesome.