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Trinka Hakes Noble

166: All About Picture Books

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 to DIY MFA Radio. Before we dive on into today's interview, I wanted to remind you that our show notes are over at diymfa.com/166, because it's Episode 166. Also, DIY MFA Radio is brought to you by our amazing fans and supporters on Patreon. If you'd like to become a patron of the show, hop on over to patreon.com/diymfa.

Now, today, I have the absolute pleasure of interviewing Trinka Hakes Noble, who is the author of many, many picture books, but the most recently, Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade. And I just have to say, before I bring her on the show, that this book literally had me crying my eyes out in a good way; it is such a heartfelt and wonderful story. So, highly recommend; and it is out in stores now. And, we're going to be talking all about picture books today on the show. Welcome, Trinka. It is so wonderful to have you.

Trinka Hakes Noble: Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm happy to be here.

GP: Awesome. So, tell us a little bit about your, the Tales of Young Americans. You've written a lot of picture books, but you have this particular series of the Tales of Young Americans, one of which is Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade. Can you tell us a little bit about the series and also the inspiration behind it?

THN: I'd love to. I was very happy to write the very first one in this series, Tales of Young Americans, published by Sleeping Bear Press. And they actually came to me and asked me if I would write the first one. And, they gave me all kinds of freedom and leeway. So, I decided that the main character in this story would have to connect with children to today.

And if they actually connected with that main character and really could almost walk in their shoes, no matter what time period it was, it would connect with the readers today. And so the first one is The Scarlet Stockings Spy, American Revolution tale; takes place in Philadelphia. I wrote another one, The Last Brother: A Civil War Tale about a young bugler who ends up at Gettysburg. And, this latest one, Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade takes place in New York, Lower East Side, 1918.

It's an immigrant story and it has to do with that year in history. Now, my take on historical fiction is the story is what's most important. I would even switch the words. I might put fiction historical; and the history is just underneath the story. And, you would be learning history if you were a young reader, but you wouldn't even know you were learning history. It's the story.

And if it has a deep emotional content, if it really connects with the reader to the point where you don't know that you're in 1777 in colonial, I mean in revolutionary war times in Philadelphia, you don't know if you are at the battle of Gettysburg in 1863, or whether you were a tenement girl on the Lower East Side in 1918. It connects with you today. Now, here's the clincher.

After I have presented like The Scarlet Stockings Spy to students in school; it's a very serious story and it's very heartfelt. It might have tears in your eyes, and many teachers have broken down; you know, got misty. But at the end of that story, I finished my presentation; and there's like 250 fourth-graders sitting in front of me, and you could hear a pin drop. It gets very quiet and I wait; 10 seconds go by, 30 seconds go by.

That's a long time for 250 Fourth or fifth graders. And inevitably, somebody will raise their hand and they'll ask this question very seriously: they will say, "Did that really happen?" Now, when a kid says that to you, "Did that really happen?"; oh boy, I know I hit the mark. I know that they believed it to the point that they weren't sure if this was fiction, or did it really happen? My way of thinking that is a very powerful learning tool for young kids, learning about history.

GP: I love that. I think that's really gets at the heart of fiction historical that it really is about like, it becomes so real that the fiction sort of rings more true, almost, than the historical; like that the kids see the fiction and it becomes real to them in their minds because it-- And, it brings the history to life in that way, which I think is just so great.

THN: Oh, I do too. And, the other thing is for writing it and to get that, to get that quality; my theory is to go to the place where the story happened. You will hear many authors, many writers say they did research. Sure. We all do research, but I want to do not just factual historical research; I want to do emotional research.

GP: Oh, I like that. [laughs]

THN: Now, that means-- I think you know what that means. That means, I go there as the, you know, creator, the writer; and I walk right where my characters might have walked. I look and see what they may have seen. I put myself right there and I'm very quiet. I don't say anything. I'll give you a quick example. For The Last Brother, I went to the Gettysburg battlefield in the dead of winter at night. And, I walked that battlefield by myself in the dark.

Now, the reason I did that is I didn't want any tourists or RVs or busloads of people; I wanted that place quiet. Why? Because I needed to hear those young soldiers' stories, I needed to listen intently. Now, I got to tell you that was pretty spooky.

GP: I bet.

THN: And, you know, I sat there for as long as I could, right in the night in winter; but I have to tell you, I felt that right down to my bone marrow. I felt what, what-- And, if you know anything about Civil War history, Gettysburg, oh my God; it was the worst; one of the worst battles in the whole Civil War.

And, I put my 11-year-old boy, a Bugle boy, right in the middle of it. And the only way I could feel any of that emotional content, because I'm female, I've never had to serve. I've never had to put on a military uniform.

I've never had to go to war, but I had to find out what that felt like. And so to get that authenticity, to get that deep feeling of a historical fiction, you got to go there. You got to put yourself right there. I did the same for Rettie and the Ragamuffin. I went to a wonderful place in New York, the Orchard Street Tenement Museum, a Lower East Side; and took the tour, did everything. Oh my gosh, it's wonderful. And then I just walked down the Lower East Side.

I walked where Rettie would have walked. And even though it has changed a lot, in that area of New York, a lot of the old buildings are still there. And, you know, through your imagination, you could feel it. I could feel what a hard life that young girl must have had, but how she persisted and how she overcame. So, to add to our talk about historical fiction, especially for the young reader, I really think you have to go to the place where it happens, if you can; and put yourself right there.

GP: That's fascinating. I was actually going to-- You anticipated one of my questions, because I was going to ask you about how you did the research, because I can imagine that even though, you know, we're in 2017, I would imagine that Gettysburg, the battlefield, I've never been there myself, is probably still very similar to what it would've been like and what it would've looked like.

Like, they haven't built it up or anything like that. Whereas New York City has changed a lot, but I had totally forgotten; yeah, there's the Tenement Museum down there that you can certainly kind of wrap your head around. And, then yeah, those old buildings like you really can-- I think it probably stretched-- I would imagine it stretched your imagination a bit more to do that research than the Gettysburg research, or maybe was it the same? Like, how did that compare?

THN: The reason I gave you the Gettysburg research as an example is because it was so powerful. And, you are correct, we have a lot of historical sites in this country that are very much, they are the same as they were and same in Philadelphia. But in New York, when I walked down through those streets that she would've walked in, they were very deserted, boarded up, not commercial at all down in there. And, you could still feel it. You could still feel it. And, it was pretty powerful.

GP: Absolutely. You know, another thing that kind of jumped out at me: as you were talking about the two other, The Scarlet Spy and The Last Brother, is it struck me that both of those revolve around wars. And, Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade, doesn't necessarily revolve around a war per se, but it's still in the background. So, was that a conscious choice that you have sort of used war to anchor these stories? Do you foresee Tales of Young Americans continuing to other times where war is not necessarily at the forefront?

THN: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the American Revolution, of course, was pivotal--

GP: Of course.

THN: -in the US history and the Civil War.

GP: And, Civil War as well.

THN: Oh my goodness; tore this country apart. So, those were like huge historical events that did shape a lot of our country, but not necessarily what I want war to be the center of all of the Tales of Young Americans. In this one, in the background, I like to put the history sort of in the background, is the First World War in 1918. Although it's not a major part of story, but the other part of this story is another kind of an enemy.

And, that was the pandemic of the influenza in 1918, which was worldwide. And, that's an invisible enemy. It's a war, but it's an invisible enemy that invaded this country and the world. So, that is also two historical events that are in the background of this story that do influence the story.

GP: It's interesting also how, in this particular book, those two enemies, they sort of set up the conflict, but like you said, they're not kind of the main antagonist per se, but they definitely sort of

raise the stakes, right? Like we know that the mother's sick, but we're not sure whether or not it's influenza at the beginning of the story.

And, we know that there's a war going on because the father is fighting it, but we don't necessarily-- It's not like the war-- You know, we're not on a battlefield, we're not in a quarantine hospital or something like that. Yet, it serves to raise the stakes because, all of a sudden, this girl who's-- What is she? Like 11, 10 - 11 years old, and she's--

THN: Yeah, 9 or 10.

GP: Yeah. And, she's suddenly the caregiver. Like she has three younger siblings and she has to be the grownup, even though she's 10, 11 years old; 9, 10, 11 years old. And so it's like those different elements may not be the main cause of conflict, but they serve to raise the stakes of an already difficult situation that she's in because they're living in poverty.

THN: That's correct. One of the reasons for all of what you just said, is I wanted kids today to know what kids in our history had to do or deal with. And even though they were just kids in 1918 or whenever, they knew what was going on; just like kids today, they know what's going on. And, they were part of our history. So, I wanted kids today to know that kids, their own age, had to deal with events in our history and help shape our history. And, that kids today, will be doing the same thing.

GP: And, that's so empowering for kids too; like to feel like they can actually-- Because most kids, I would imagine, probably feel like they don't have a whole big impact on history; And so that's got to be really empowering for them.

THN: I would hope so. And, when they enter in through the character, like Rettie, if you enter in through her, then you can start to feel what you might do; what difference you might make as a kid. It's like an avenue to learn not only our history, but what you could do today for our history going forward.

I hope that comes across and that even though, you know, we may never know what they're thinking as they hear the story or read the story, but they're thinking something. I can guarantee it; just like the boy who raised his hand and said, "Did that really happen?" You know, they're thinking. It's just a great thing; great genre for kids.

GP: Absolutely. You know, one of the things I loved and I'd love to hear you talk about, how you crafted the character of Rettie, because one of the things that struck me as I was reading this book; and part of what I think really moved me while reading this book is how she's not the victim. Like, there's a lot of bad stuff happening in her life. She lives in poverty.

They're barely scraping by as a family. Her dad is gone. Her mom is sick. She's got three younger siblings, one of whom is an infant; and yet, she never comes across like victim-wise. She's very industrious. Like, there's this scene where she's bargaining for the food, and like, you know, "I'll pay you this much and not that much", with grownups. Like, she's bartering with adults. Like, that's pretty impressive.

And then when she kind of, you know, she realizes like the person in her tenement, the, I guess, the equivalent of a superintendent is not able to, you know, is quarantine. So, she's like, "I'll volunteer, I'll take care of the hallways." And, she's kind of-- You know, she's very industrious.

And so to me, like, when you were crafting this character, how did you, like, what was your thought process to make her come across that way? Because it would be very easy, I would think, to make

a character feel like they're just going to be the victim in the story; but she's not, she's a survivor, but she's a plucky survivor.

THN: Well, I can say that-- I think I can answer that question in just a few words. She's an American girl.

[laughter]

THN: She's an American girl. That means something, doesn't it? She's free. She's strong. She's industrious. She's inventive. You call it Yankee Ingenuity, call it pluck, call it anything you want; but she's an American girl. And, I'm all for empowering girls.

[laughter]

THN: But that's why she is; comes across, as you just astutely observed, she is not the victim. There's a lot of hardship, misery, sickness going around her, but she is not a victim. And, there's another character in here that I put in on purpose. And, that is the visiting nurse, like a health service. And, that did start around 19, in the early 1900s with places like the Henry Street Settlement, where they had nurses go out and help these immigrant families and children. But there's a nurse in the story named Nurse Pauline.

And, I put her in there as someone Rettie comes in contact with and immediately looks up to the Nurse Pauline. Nurse Pauline in the story, she comes to visit quarantine, the supervisor of the building, as you just mentioned. And, Rettie hops right in there and gets that job of cleaning the hallways and scrubbing the stoop. But Rettie is impressed with that nurse; she has never seen anyone so tidy.

And when the nurse enters Rettie's small apartment, two-room tenement apartment; she is impressed that it's very clean, that the younger siblings are well-cared for. And, she looks around and she says, "Child, have you been doing all of this?" And, Rettie said, "Yes." And, the nurse is impressed with Rettie; and she puts her hand on her shoulder and she said, "You would make a fine nurse someday."

Now, I put that in on purpose because this story is about hope. And, in this country, and at that time, I don't care who you were or how hard your life was, or if you were an immigrant child, like Rettie; you had hope. And that's because you were here in this country, you had hope. And so I put Nurse Pauline in there as someone Rettie would, maybe she'd be a nurse someday. That's why she's not a victim.

GP: And, you know, it's interesting also because it's, the way it's phrased it's, "Maybe you'd make a fine nurse, someday"; but it's not like the nurse is swooping in and saving the day for Rettie. And, that's such a key thing in children's books; that you have to let the kid main character be the one to solve their own problems. And, it's very difficult to do that when the character is so young and there often are grownups around.

Like, you know, they say in children's books, 'the first thing you have to do is get rid of the parents, get rid of the adults'; so the kids have to solve their own problems. But it's interesting that even when you purposefully put this adult character in there, she's suggesting hope; like she's saying she's offering hope, but she's still allowing Rettie to be the one to make that choice.

You know what I mean? Like it's not like she's swooping in and solving all the problems and fixing everything for Rettie. So, I thought that was really powerful about that moment is that it offers hope without disempowering Rettie at the same time.

THN: Good point. Yes, absolutely. And, as I said, she is the main character. She's an American girl; and you know she's going to make it, you just know it. It's inferred, but in your heart, you're rooting for her and you just, you want her to make it. And, that's what I hope kids will feel too, is they're going to root for her. Even though they may have hardship in their lives; and believe me, kids today have a lot of things they have to deal with; maybe they will have a little hope in their heart too.

GP: Absolutely. You know, and I was thinking also like, as you tied it to kids today, I mean, given that, you know, this book is out now, but I would imagine that you were probably already writing it when, you know, at the end of last year, at the end of 20, or have it already written. And, a lot's changed; and especially for immigrants, like in the last 6, 8 months.

THN: Yes.

GP: I mean, did you anticipate that; how has that shifted sort of where this book fits in culture? Because I feel like in some ways, it makes the book all the more powerful, right?

THN: Right.

GP: That now, you know, we've had all this stuff happening like in our country in the last year.

THN: Of course, I didn't know that at the time, but it makes this book even more apropo today, especially with any kind of immigrant families or immigrant children, because it's, they're going through the same thing. They're going through the same thing. And so, can we not learn from our history going forward?

I think that would be a strong takeaway message from this book to children is, let's learn from the past and not repeat the same mistakes. So yeah, you're right; with today's climate, politically and socially and all other ways; I think this book is just very, very timely.

GP: Yeah. I mean, so, my parents immigrated to the United States. And so as the older sister, child of immigrants, you know, First-Generation American, even though I did not grow up in 1918, this story felt very real to me; and it really hit home. And so I feel like if that's the effect it had on me as an adult, I can imagine how, you know, for a kid, what that would mean.

Which brings me to another question: you mentioned earlier when you were describing the experience of reading these stories to kids at schools, and you mentioned, you know, you might be reading to 200 fourth-graders. Most of the time, people don't think of picture books for being for fourth-graders. They usually think, "Oh, that's for like a four-year-old, not a fourth-grader."

Yet, these books are definitely older in terms of the sophistication, the themes, even the number of words on a page. Can you talk a little bit about the Picture Book genre? Because I don't think it's strictly all one-size-fits-all. There's a lot of nuance in it, and you've written a lot of it. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

THN: Yes, I'd love to. Originally, when I started out in publishing, we had two types of books. We had the Picture Book, and then we had something called the Storybook. And, today, everything is called a picture book, and no one really talks about a Storybook. The difference is a Storybook, if I read you a storybook over the radio, you'd get it. You'd understand it without seeing the pictures.

The picture, simply enhance that story and bring it to life for the reader. Now, if I read you a Picture Book over the radio, you wouldn't understand it. You wouldn't get the story because you couldn't

see the pictures because the story is in the pictures as well as the words; it bounces back and forth. So, the genre of a Picture Book that we think of today for very young children is just a unique genre. I love it. It's pre-verbal. It's visual and it's verbal.

It brings the two together. Now, if you're a very young child, a non-reader: you haven't learned to read yet, maybe you don't even know the alphabet or you're learning to read or a reluctant reader; you can always read the pictures. We all can read the pictures, but maybe not the words. And so the picture book is such a link between visual and literary.

Now, if you go back to prehistoric times, when humans did not have developed language or language at all, what did they do? They drew those beautiful pictures on the cave wall that we've all seen. If they needed to communicate, they wanted to relate; they drew a picture of what they wanted to say. Now, so, the picture book is that first link between picture and words. In other words, it's called the Picture Book, visual literary. The Storybook is a little bit different.

That would be like the next step up; and that pictures enhance the story. Now, why did I want all these pictures? Like you just said, this is like for maybe a second, third; mature second, third, fourth-grader, maybe fifth. The reason I did this and wanted it this way; and like I said, my publisher gave me a lot of leeway is I felt that the older kids in elementary school were getting cheated out of this fabulous artwork and that they wanted the artwork too.

They should have these beautiful pictures so that they can visualize and see. And so I didn't want to give up that visual for the little bit older reader. So, I think of these as an older Picture Book for a little bit older kid than maybe preschool nursery school Pre-K and kindergarten. So, it's more for maybe a mature first, second, third, fourth grader.

Now, a lot of these books, tie in with their Social Studies and what they're learning in school; and teachers use them to teach and the kids love it because they get to see the pictures. So, that's, I didn't want to give up the art and I didn't want kids to be cheated out of the pictures.

GP: It's interesting also because with the pictures, all of a sudden, it becomes more of a communal reading experience, right? Like it's much harder, I think, for a teacher or for an author coming in to do a school visit, to hold a captive audience when you're reading a chapter of a Chapter-book. But if you're reading a Picture Book, all of a sudden, it becomes like that communal story-time.

And whereas if the kids are reading; I mean, by the time they're in second, third, fourth grade; they'd probably be able to read these books on their own. But the fact that they're Picture Books then makes it like a shareable experience. So, it's not just a kid sitting alone in the book corner of their classroom reading this book to themselves, they can actually share it with each other and be reading together, which I think makes it a very powerful experience as well.

THN: Well, when I do a school presentation, I don't read it. I don't read the story to them. I have all the pictures up on a PowerPoint, but remember I said, the story, I wanted the story to be more important. So, I don't read it to them. I tell them the story, like a storyteller; and just having a story told to you is a very wonderful, powerful thing. And then to see the pictures on top of that, is just like frosting on the cake.

So, I just tell them the story in my own voice. And, you know, story is just vital to human beings. We have to have story. I mean, no, we have to have food and we have to have air and we have to have shelter, but we need story. So, story is very, very important, I think. [laughs]

GP: And, you know, drawing on the cave people example that you gave, story is essentially what brought our cultures together. Like, until people could tell stories and figured out how to tell stories; we were basically like, you know, ships passing in the night. It's like the act of storytelling becomes that community building experience. So, it's very much ingrained in our culture. There's even research that shows that story is like hardwired into our brains, which is kind of awesome.

THN: I believe it. I think it's in our DNA. I think we need story just as much as we need food and shelter and light and air. Definitely.

GP: It's also interesting, like what you were saying about the artwork and how the artwork sort of adds to the story, there's also certain nuances. So, one thing I noticed as I was reading Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade is there's this little cat in the illustration.

THN: Yes. [laughs] Oh, thank you for noticing that. You got it, yeah.

GP: Yeah. And, that cat is not written into the story in any way.

THN: No.

GP: But that cat is part of the story. And, at the end, when we see sort of the end result with that cat, we suddenly, it sort of emphasizes, or it kind of becomes that additional little layer of like the generosity and the industriousness, the kind of, you know, pluckiness of Rettie and her family. And yet, it's in the picture. So like, it's almost like there are these undercurrents of the story that happen in the pictures, in addition to what's happening in the words, which I think is so awesome. And, you can't do that if you're only writing the words.

THN: That's right. There's like that little sub-story of getting a stray who needs a home, and that's what this whole story's about, you know? Rettie does not want her younger siblings to go to an orphanage; and believe me, there were some bad things in orphanages. And so that little cat, that little kitten is not going to go to a shelter or something like that; it's going to be adopted by this family.

Now, the reason that, and thank you for noticing that, the reason that's there is when a young reader looks at a picture, we do it differently as adults. When adults look at a picture, we see whole thing and work our way down to the details, like the little kitten; but when a kid looks at a picture, they go the other way, they find the little detail first and then they work their way up to the entire picture.

So, that small kitten is in there for a very specific reason. It's so that there's something that the young reader can find and look for in each picture as you go through the story. So, there's a reason for that. Isn't that cool?

GP: It is cool. And, I was going to ask you-- You know, you are an author and an illustrator, but in this particular book, you are not the illustrator. So, was this something that you discussed with the illustrator? Was this an idea that the illustrator brought to the table? How did that-- How did the kitten happen?

THN: Well, that's a great question. David Gardner is the illustrator and did beautiful drawings. I'm very fortunate as a writer-author that I get to see the pencil dummies and the pencil sketches. And, I get to see all the work along the way, which is a real-- It's a privilege. Believe me, it's an honor that they let me do that. And, as it were for this book, the book designer talked with the illustrator. She's wonderful. And, she thought maybe there should be an animal, a little animal in the story. And so the illustrator put in that kitten, wasn't that great that he did that?

GP: It's fascinating.

THN: The little kitten is on the street with the other kids that have been probably orphaned overnight because of the influenza epidemic. And, it's sort of in an alley with these little kids that are more or less living in an alley. And, that's where you pick up that little sub-story. And, if you follow it along, you'll find that kitten followed Rettie home.

And, then you see her in the picture and you see the little kitten coming into the apartment, being welcomed. And the very last picture, as you pointed out where they're having their Thanksgiving celebration, the kitten has a little bowl of food right there for it. It's found a home. So, yeah, it's just-- That's why I just think kids are being cheated out of those pictures; you know, some of the older readers.

GP: Then it almost becomes like an interactive thing too, right? Like, that the kid-- Like you said, the kid then has something to look for in the different pictures. And, it also adds a sub-story to, you know, the overarching story. So, I thought that was so great. I loved it.

THN: Oh, I did too, when I saw it. Great.

GP: So, you have done illustration in the past, did you begin as an illustrator?

THN: I did. My whole background is in art; and I was Fine Arts major, Painting. I have always loved the artwork in children's books, always. And so when I came East from where I grew up in Michigan, and college, out of college; I came to New York to study Children's Book Illustration and Writing. And so in New York, I went to school to study Children's Book Illustration.

So, I actually started out as an illustrator, and thought that was going to be my career. However, as we just talked about the Picture Book, that it's beautiful genre: you know that the art and the text, the art and the writing; they just fit together like a perfect marriage. That's what you want.

And so it was sort of a natural process to want to, to start writing this story and drawing it almost at the same time. So, when I'm working on a story, I'm a very visual person, being an artist and a very visual writer, not descriptive; but I mean, I can see it, I can see that story.

And so when I write a story, I'm also drawing the pictures in my head almost at the same time, if I'm going to do both the writing and illustrating. And that's why it's just wonderful when you can do both, and if you do both, because you're combining that ancient thing of pictures and story.

That prehistoric, you know, wired in our DNA, we need pictures and we need story. So, you're doing it all together at the same time, which is just incredible. I think some of the most successful Picture Books are a lot of times done by the same person.

GP: So, is it challenging when you're working as the writer and you have another illustrator? I mean, I'm sure it's a lot of fun to have the interaction and to work with a different person, but what are some of the challenges like, do you sometimes, has it ever happened that you envision the story in one way and then the illustrations are different from what you envisioned? Like, how does that work? Because I would have a hard time relinquishing that control, I can tell you.

THN: Well, I have to tell you, it is at times difficult, but the sort of unspoken rule in children's publishing is that the author and the illustrator never meet. You never get together and talk about that story. Everything has to go through your editor, and there's a good reason for it. Although it's a little bit hard on the writer, but there's a really good-- Being an illustrator, I get it; so, there's a good reason.

And, that is to make sure that illustrator has their artistic license, artistic freedom to bring their own creative genius to the story. And, as the author, there comes a point where you got to let go and you have to trust your editor, your art director, and the illustrator. What you really want is that illustrator to read your story, just like you read Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade and it brought tears to your eyes, you felt it.

You want that illustrator to feel that story and take it to heart; and bring his or her own creative, visual genius to the story. And, what happens if that happens? What happens is your story gets elevated up to a higher level. And, that's what you always hope for. Doesn't always happen, but I've been very, very lucky with my illustrators, for my stories because I've had some great ones; and I've never really had a real issue or problem.

But one of the reasons I haven't is, like I told you; I'm very honored in that my editor will show me the sketches, the pencil dummy. You know, I can see the progress, and I can make suggestions only.

You know, I don't make decisions, but I could make suggestions, and hopefully, they get in somebody's ear and it ends up in the story, but you got to trust. It's hard. [laughs] I can relate. It's hard to let go of something you wrote, and put your heart and soul into, and hand it over to someone else to finish with the illustrations, but you got to trust.

GP: And, you're so right in the idea that it elevates it, right? Because, I mean, this is very different. It's not like I had an illustrator, but for the DIY MFA book, like I have a background in design as my listeners probably heard me nerd out about graphic design a whole lot. And, the DIY MFA visuals have always been a point of obsession for me.

[laughter]

GP: So, when it was time to relinquish that control to my publisher; that was, you know-- We talked about how the brand was important of me, but at the end of the day, I knew that they had control. And that, that was something that I would have to let go of. And, in the end, it worked out really well, like to the point where-- I mean, I often joke with my editor. I had lunch with her this past weekend and I was telling her like, to this day, I can't tell the difference between the sentences I wrote versus the ones that she tweaked.

And, that's a mark of a good editor, right? Like, when you can't tell the difference. And, the same thing I think is true with the design is like, I can't tell the difference between the way I would've done it versus the way it was actually done by the designer who did the book layout and who did all of the, the cover and all of that stuff. It's almost like; it feels inevitable now looking at the way the book came out.

I think that's really, at the end of the day, what you're hoping for is that it feels inevitable. It feels like the final product could not have been done any other way. And, that to me is the mark of a well-produced book in any genre, whether it's Picture Book or for adults or what have you.

THN: Yes. And, that's also the mark of, in my field - the editor, the book designer, the art director - really working well together. You get a good team like that. And then like you just said, like, you want an editor where she or he could finish your sentences; and they would be exactly what you were going to say.

GP: Exactly. Except you didn't realize you were going to say it, but they somehow read your mind and did it for you. It's kind of amazing.

THN: It is. But I can relate with you in that it's hard to let go.

GP: It is.

THN: But you got to trust that they all know what they're doing. And, in Rettie and the Ragamuffin Parade, one of the reasons I did get to see a lot of pencil sketches was to check for visual historical detail because we want all the history in the story to be correct, but you want the visual to be correct. And, I did find something and it's a small thing, but I think people would notice, and that's the street light.

Originally, he had drawn a very sort of old-fashioned, but yet modern-looking street light; you might even have been able to see it at like Home Depot or something. And, I thought, wait a minute. And so I sent him the picture because down in that historical, the Orchard Street, Tenement Museum; and down on Orchard Street and Broome Street, and some of those streets: the old street light is still there.

And so I sent him a picture. I sent it to the Art Director and Book Designer, and she sent it on to David and he changed it and put in the old street light. So, even some little details like that, I got to have an influence.

You know, I asked for a little more ethnic-looking people or ethnic, you know, costumes in 1918; and he put them in. So, that was a wonderful; and you know, that restores your faith because then you know you got to let go, it'll be okay when you have people as dedicated as that working on your book.

GP: Absolutely. So, what's coming up next for you? Do you have any other Tales of Young Americans in the works? Any ideas for new projects coming up?

THN: Yes, I do. It's not contracted yet, so I can't talk too much about it, but I am working on another story. And, it could be a Tales of Young Americans, but it's not determined yet. It takes place in Detroit, in 1938, just briefly. It was during the depression, also hardship, but there was an incredibly world event. And, it was the Heavyweight Championship, you know, of the world boxing match between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling.

It was just before World War II. A lot of hardship that we didn't quite know about in Europe was going on already. And, it was almost the era-ian German against an African American; and the world watched it. The world watched it. It was such a big event. So, I'm writing a story where two boys are being influenced by that event.

And, it's, like I said, not under contract yet, so I can't talk too much about it; but it's the same type of thing where a kid in that time period was being influenced by the events of our nation and world, in that case. So, it's sort of in the works.

GP: And, it's interesting. It sounds like you're moving from the past closer and closer to the present. Do you see yourself moving? Like if you were to continue the Young Americans, do you see yourself coming closer and closer?

Like, would you be doing things that are more in like the 1960s and 80s and whatnot; or do you really see it as like firmly planted in, you know, further back history, the Tales of Young Americans Series? I mean, obviously you don't know because none of these are under contract, but like in terms of vision, like, do you have a vision for where you could see the series going?

THN: Well, there's really no reason that something couldn't be placed in the 60s, which we had a lot of things going on in; presidential assassinations, Martin Luther King, The Civil Rights Movement,

The Feminist Movement, Countercultural Revolution. And, I was there; I was in college in the 60s, so it's would really be close to home, but there's no reason that something couldn't be written in that time period because it was--

I just picked the 60s, but it influenced our culture and things changed. It was a pivotal decade and things after that changed, hopefully for the better, hopefully, especially for young women, which would have influenced you. So yeah, it would be really interesting to go that route; and I don't see any reason why not. It doesn't have to be, you know, early, early history in America.

GP: And, it would also, I think be a different experience, writing about, because you said like that was the time that you were in college. So, like, you remember, whereas I would imagine you were not around in 1918 to write. [laughs] So, it would be a different experience, I think, writing in a time period where you would be imagining a child in that time period, but you lived through it yourself - versus sort of doing that history research by, you know, having to do the research as opposed to the experiential aspect of it.

THN: Right. I'm not sure how I would go about that. That would be a really interesting challenge, wouldn't it?

GP: I know, right? Like, because it's like, I wonder then as a writer, is it harder to write about what you don't quite know because then you have more of that objectivity; or would it actually be good to have experienced it as a person, even though you wouldn't have been a child at the time, so it would be a different perspective on it? Like, it's an interesting question, right?

THN: It really is. And, you have piqued my interest; thank you very much. [laughs]

GP: Now you might--

THN: How do I do this? I'm sorry. I have to go write right now.

[laughter]

GP: Well, I will look forward to reading--

THN: That would be a challenge.

GP: [laughs] If and when you write that, I cannot wait to read it; so, there you go. You have someone waiting for it already.

THN: [laughs] You'll be first on my list.

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

THN: Show up at the page. Just show up at the page. I don't care if you sit there for a half-hour and don't write one word, show up at the page. And, the reason I say that, and I'll give just a brief background is I believe, at least, for me, and maybe almost all writing; a little part of, or some portion of the writer ends up in the story. And, in order for that to be authentic and original, you got to know who you are. And, the only way--

Well, what I think is, know who you are: invite silence, invite stillness; welcome it. Spend time with yourself, get to know who you really are. And then when you're writing your story, you draw on that authentic inner-person that is the real you and make sure that it shows up on your page. That would be sort of the bedrock tip for writers today. Go right down to your source, your core; and write from there.

GP: That's beautiful. I mean, honestly, and I couldn't have put it better myself. Like, that's just so powerful. So, listen up listeners, because that was, that was gold. I wholeheartedly agree. So, thank you for that.

THN: Oh my pleasure. Thank you.

GP: So, thank you so much for being on the show. It has been so much fun. I feel like we could talk for another four hours, but we won't because we both have writing to do.

THN: Yes, I do. I do.

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