diyMFA

Julie Zickefoose

105: From Idea to Finished Book

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.

Before we launch into today's episode, I wanted to remind you about our Storytelling Superpower video series. If you haven't already signed up for this series, you can do so over at DIYMFA.com/STSPvideo. This is a short video series; you'll get one video a day for a week, and it's designed to help you understand the type of characters that you are uniquely good at writing.

Also, if you haven't already taken our Storytelling Superpower quiz, you can do so over at DIYMFA.com/STSP, and I'll include both of these links in the show notes for this episode. I hope you will join me for this free video series.

Think of it as a weeklong Masterclass that I am giving to my readers, to my word nerds, to celebrate the fact that the DIY MFA book is now out in the world. This is my gift to you to mark this incredible milestone in my writing life. So, I hope you'll join me for this video series because it's going to be a lot of fun. Now, here's our interview.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Before we dive into today's interview, I wanted to remind you that the show notes are over at diymfa.com/105 because it's Episode 105.

Today, I am speaking with Julie Zickefoose, who is an artist and an author of three books, the latest one being Baby Birds: An Artist Looks Into the Nest, which is out now. Her passion for natural history has driven her to lead excursions abroad, and to speak at nature festivals and horticulture societies all over the place.

She lives with her family in an 80-acre sanctuary in Appalachian, Ohio, which sounds heavenly to me. And this sanctuary, Indigo Hill, has hosted 194 bird species and – 80, sorry – 78 species of butterflies as of 2016, which is amazing.

In today's interview, we're going to be talking about how an author can turn a passion for a particular subject into a book or into something even bigger than a book. As you guys know, DIY MFA began as a passion project; it was just an inkling of an idea that has grown into what you see today.

So, I love hearing authors talk about how they pursue those passions – how they keep going, even when they're not sure exactly where it's going to lead. So, welcome, Julie. It is wonderful to have you on the show today.

Julie Zickefoose: Well, thank you. I'm very excited about it too.

GP: Wonderful. So, when I first learned of your book, the first thing that drew me, obviously, were the beautiful illustrations. And I'm not really a nature buff. I mean, I live in New York City – basically, the only birds I know about are pigeons; and they're not exactly the most glamorous of species.

But what really drew me into the book, when I started looking closer, is the passion behind this particular project. Can you take us back to that very first moment, that inkling of an idea, where you thought, 'I have to do this?' What was that moment, and what drove you to this project?

JZ: Well, I guess the birds I've been working with the longest and most consistently are Eastern bluebirds. I have 26 nesting boxes spread across about a 10-mile radius around my house. Most of them are clustered near my home, so I can walk to them and check them once a week.

And I was walking up to these boxes and seeing this miracle every day – where I'd walk up, open a box, and there'd be baby birds hatching. And I would just-- You know, I'd bring my kids along, and I'd bring friends; and everybody would just flip out because they never thought they'd get to see something like that.

From there, it was quite natural for me to want to paint that, to draw that from life. And, since I had the necessary Federal and State permits to handle the birds – and I knew what I was doing it, starting with bluebirds was a no-brainer for me.

I'd always kept nature journals – probably since I was in high school, early high school – I'd always drawn, and then written a bunch of notes in the margins of my drawing. So, it was-- It was so natural to me to go, 'Oh wow, what if I were to paint and draw this transformation of this little blob of pink flesh, you know, into a bird, into a feathered flying bird?'

So, I did that first one; and at the same time, Carolina Wrens were nesting in a hanging basket on my front porch. And, since it was a perfectly safe location and it was inaccessible to any predators – as are my nesting boxes – I thought, 'Oh, well, what if I were to paint Carolina Wren too?'

And I was off and running, I just couldn't get enough of it; and I still can't. But the problem is that I've run out of birds that I can safely work with because their nests have to be in completely protected locations for me to be able to work with them.

GP: So, talk a little bit about that. When you have a project that you really do, sort of, like the ethical aspects behind this project, what were some of the things you had to grapple with?

JZ: Well, the whole physician's creed Primum non nocere – which is… first, do no harm – is really primary in my mind because I work as a rehabilitator, a wildlife rehabilitator. This is me going outside. [laughs]

You know, I'm always trying to help birds; and so, the first thing on my mind was, 'You cannot endanger these birds for your art.' And so, of course, there are many predators that climb up to nests like; black rat snakes, and house cats, and opossums – and even chipmunks and white-footed mice are bad predators of nests.

You can't walk up to just any bird nest and stick your fingers in it, and expect the babies to be there the next day because predators will follow your scent. So, I had a very special situation with my nesting boxes where I have a stovepipe baffle on the metal pole that supports the nest box, and nothing can climb past it.

So, I can open the box and handle the babies with comparative impunity. Now, a lot of people wonder if the adult birds are going to desert the nest because I've handled them; and that actually doesn't happen because birds are much strong, very, very strongly bonded to their young – and a little experienced quick handling, doesn't deter the birds from caring for their young at all. This is actually an old wives' tale that we've been taught since we were little.

So, that was the thing is-- You know, I had to work with birds that were safe – that, you know, I couldn't just walk up and reach into a robin's nest and borrow a baby every day to paint, and expect it to still be there. So, I had-- I had a very limited compliment of birds I could actually work with.

GP: So, as you were developing this project, what was the very first big obstacle that you hit? I mean, you've touched on, you know, sort of the safety of the birds – but were there other obstacles, like how do you keep a baby bird still long enough to be able to paint and write about it?

[laughter]

JZ: Yeah, I like to say that the ability to paint baby birds from life and do a book, like this is a rather specialized skill set. You have to be able to draw live birds quickly – that move, you know, from life. You have to be able to feed and nurture and keep warm these little baby birds that are depending on you.

You have to have State and Federal permits; and you have to be, you know, knowledgeable enough to handle them without hurting them – and to feed them the right foods. So, there's all these things that put into it. So, I quickly realized that the reason this has never been done before is because there aren't many people with this exact skillset that I possess.

GP: So, you know, it's interesting because a lot of writers worry that if they share their ideas too soon or if they, you know, tell other people what they're working on, that somehow someone will scoop their story. Right?

And of course, your example is this perfect example of how your skillset is just so perfectly crafted for this project that like, there's no way someone else could have stolen this idea. So, knowing that, did you share it with a lot of people? And if so, how did the sharing help to amplify the project?

JZ:: Well, I live out in the middle of the country; I'm 18 miles from the nearest carton of milk, so there isn't a whole lot of, you know, sharing that goes on. And I also had no idea it would be a book. It was just something I did.

It was like part and extension of my nature journals. So, it wasn't until I was maybe 10 plates into it that I thought, 'Jeez, this is kind of a neat body of work, you know, maybe, maybe I should make this into a book.'

So, I took the-- I took the paintings that I had done to date into New York City to meet with my agent, Russell Galen, who is a wonderful and passionate advocate for Natural History writers and illustrators. And we were talking about another book I was working on The Bluebird Effect, and I said, "I want to show you something, Russ."

And we were in a dark bar – somewhere in Manhattan – and I pulled out these huge oversized 20 by 30-inch paintings, each one of which had all these figures of tiny baby birds growing up in the feathered birds. Each one of them done every day, you know, in a painstaking manner.

And I spread them out on a little round top table, under this little Hamilton lightbulb, I remember; and he absolutely flipped out. And he said, "Oh my God, I've never seen anything, like, nobody's ever done this – you have to do a book and furthermore, it's going to be an elephant folio, we have to do these exactly life-size."

And I was like, "Russ, nobody buys elephant folios – no, no, no, no, no – I want it to be a real book." He said, "Well, we'll deal with that later." But, you know, let's just say he was very excited because he immediately grasped how unique it was.

GP: So, as you were developing this project, like what was the primary-- I mean, you've told us like the passion for drawing these birds, but when things started to get difficult, how did you keep at it?

Because this is a long-sustained project and if you don't have like that-- Especially, once you had that final vision, like, 'Yes, I want this to be a book,' how do you kind of keep yourself on track – without, you know, like – even when the going gets tough, as it were?

JZ: Sure. Well, the going was tough the whole time; and probably the major reason is that in order to do this, you have to be present for anywhere from 10 to 45 days in the same spot at the same time every day – you try that sometimes. [laughs]

So, it was extremely difficult for me to be there every day to paint this stuff and to draw these birds because I have a normal life. You know, I have two kids and a number of other commitments – besides just, you know, making my dream book.

So yeah, that was tough, and sometimes-- Well, like, it took me 13 years to accumulate all these 17 species because, you know, I wasn't going to have a nest of one of them in my box every year – or sometimes it was, I was outsourcing, you know, birds from other areas.

And so, I guess that was the primary obstacle, was just like amassing enough of this work to make a book. And by the time I got 17 species, I was pretty much done with what I could conceivably do.

GP: So, tell us a little bit about like the actual, like for listeners who may not have actually looked at the book yet, like, what exactly were you doing? So, you talked about these large 20 by 30 pages and you draw the different, you know, the bird as it grew.

Were you writing simultaneously, because you do-- In the book, you have those like Day 1, Day 2, and you sort of write your notes as you observe. Was that after the fact or was that as you drew the birds?

JZ: Well, that's where my, my persistent note-taking came in very handy. You know, I think all writers should carry something with them to write on at all times – because if you don't write it down, it never happened.

And so, what I would do is every day I would go out to the nest or the box, take a baby, bring it back into the studio, keep it for anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes. And while I was drawing and painting it, I was making copious notes right on the page that told me what I was noticing about its development, you know, especially in comparison to the prior day.

So, I had those very detailed notes; and in some cases, I also kept a very detailed, you know, like log, a continual prose log on my computer of all the things that went on around this endeavor. So, that's how I did it. I keep all my notes, I'm pretty careful about how I organize them.

So, I was able to go back to those, even those ones that were done around the year 2000 and 2001; and I could go back and find these perfect notes. And in one case, a tree swallow chapter.

I just reprinted my notes verbatim because they were so well-realized and they were so immediate, and that's the quality that I'd like. But in some cases, I did write the whole story. I mean, I certainly wrote the story as I was finishing the book; you know, I would craft these notes into a narrative.

GP: That's really fascinating to me because what's interesting, obviously, about this project - and I think about Nature Writing and Natural History, in general – is like the immediacy of the story, and that you're observing and those observations are coming to life on the page.

And obviously, with the illustrations, it's not like you could really do a whole lot of editing after the fact because the beauty of them is that kind of, you know, immediacy.

JZ: Right.

GP: So, it's interesting like deciding how to edit the notes. Like what were some of the factors that you thought about when you were going back into the notes that you edited more heavily so that you could decide like, 'This is okay – this chapter, the Swallow chapter is the way it is – but this other chapter really needs an overhaul?' How did you parse through that?

JZ: Well, in some cases, I could rely heavily on my notes because they were there. In other cases, some of the-- some of the birds I painted were done from photographs taken by other people, a small percentage were.

So, in that case, since I didn't have a personal story other than painting from these photographs and picking up on these changes that the birds were going through, I would craft a story that had to do with perhaps the person who was helping me with the project or perhaps some interesting aspect of the bird's natural history.

Like, for instance, the House Finch, those photos were taken by a very wonderful woman on Long Island – I'm sorry, in New Jersey – named Connie Roman. And I just totally stumbled on it.

Somebody shared a photo on Facebook to me, and said, "Look at this amazing picture of a baby house finch; it's only one day old and you can see everything it's eaten right through the skin of its crop," which is the little area on the esophagus where they store food.

And I looked at this, and I was like, 'Holy cow, this woman is photographing house finches every day.' So, I Facebook messaged her, and said, "Would you mind if you took a few more photos, and I was able to use them?" And she was like, 'No problem.' So, she sent me this massive folder of photos, like on a disc, and it was wonderful, but I didn't have a story of my own.

So, in that case, I built the chapter around the incredible explosive expansion of the house finch in the Eastern United States since about 1940. This bird was native only to the West, the American West. And it was sold as a pet in pet stores as a Hollywood limit because it sang. Well, The Migratory Bird Treaty Act made it illegal to keep wild native birds in cages or possess them at all.

So, there was, I guess, two huge crates of them released in an, I think it's one of the airports in New York City. I can't remember if it was LaGuardia or JFK, they just opened the crates and let these birds go. And from that one introduction, the entire population of House Finches in the Eastern US has been built. So, it's a fascinating story.

And then, the story that follows that is what happened to those House Finches after they exploded? And that is, the disease took them down because they were so inbred from that small founder population that they couldn't resist this terrible disease called mycoplasma that infects them.

So, to me that was a perfect microcosm of nature at work in the span of my lifetime; you know, this bird is introduced, it expands explosively – disease says, "Not so fast, Mr. House Finch." You know, cuts it way down to a fragment of its former population. So, that was the story I told for the House Finch.

GP: That's so fascinating. And you know, it's just interesting how like you're able to choose a story and, like, pull a whole story like that out of a bird that you've never interacted with. I mean, one of the things I love with the – I think it's the – Carolina Wrens that you--

JZ: Yes.

Gabriela Pereira: -you really like-- Those birds have a personality. Like, as I was reading those sections, like especially when you were talking about like introducing the species, they're pretty funny birds. Can you tell us a little bit more about them and sort of what those interactions were like?

JZ: Well, Carolina Wrens are extremely teeny birds. I worked for a number of months as a field assistant to someone in Amazon in Brazil; and I was skinning and preparing specimens of birds that he was netting. It was very sad word for me because I'd much prefer my birds alive, but it did get me to the Amazon, which was great.

So, as I was skinning away, I noticed that Wrens of this genus Thryothorus, which includes the Carolina Wren, had the biggest brains for their body size of any bird I'd ever prepared. And I was like, Hmm.

So, with that little bit of knowledge under my arm, I looked at the Carolina Wrens back home with new eyes; and in fact, these things would completely take advantage of me.

If I would prop the front door open to bring groceries in, the Carolina Wrens would simply help themselves – and hop right into my house and like hop around the house… look for food, pick the spiders out of the corners, go into every bathroom, every bedroom… absolutely fearless and just self-assured.

Then when I was ready to have them out of the house, I'd just, I'd say, "Chap-chap, everybody out," and these birds would just hop back to the front door and let themselves out the way they'd come in.

That's very unusual behavior for a wild bird. But Carolina Wrens have a brain organization that is geared for enclosed spaces. If they get into a place, they remember how they get in and they go back out the same way. That's very rare. Most birds in an enclosed space sort of panic or fly up and perch really high, and just have no idea what to do.

GP: You know, that's so funny when you were saying, you were describing like, you know, 'Everybody out,' I had like this picture of like Snow White or a Disney princess.

JZ: Oh yeah.

GP: You know? With like the little birds and rabbits, like, you know, going in and out of the house.

JZ: Totally. You need to come visit. I got to say, there are so many moments of Disney in my life; like the summer where I raised four baby hummingbirds – and then when I released them, I expected that they would just fly off.

I don't know why I expected that… but when they stayed around the yard for a month and a half, and would land like right next to me and look at me like, 'Well, how are you today?' It was just-- It was so amazing.

I can't even describe what it feels like to be eating your dinner outside at the picnic table, and have a hummingbird come down and poke all the red tomatoes in your salad. You're like, 'Huh, look at this, Huh.' It's pretty fabulous.

So, I don't make pets out of them, but they remember me and they identify me as their mother, I think. And so, they hang around me as they would their mother. They're totally comfortable with me.

GP: Oh, that's so sweet. So, what drew you to birds, in particular?

JZ: I think it dates to when I was eight years old, and I had had this thing for cats and horses; those were my two animals that I drew all the time and I really loved. My father had a pair of binoculars and they were very old and worn, but I got ahold of them; and I heard the sound of a small bird bathing behind my house in Richmond, Virginia. There was a little five-acre woodlot, and I remember sort of jungle crawling toward this little woodland pool.

And I was literally on my belly just poking, just pulling myself through-- And I saw a blue winged warbler taking a bath, just a matter of feet away from me. This bird is entirely golden yellow with slate blue wings and a little black mask through its eyes, and it's about four and three quarters inches long.

So, it's like this little fairy. And I looked at that thing, and I thought, 'What is this? I've never seen anything like this. I've seen robins, I've seen Bluebirds, but this is something special.'

So, I begged my parents for a bird guide; and they bought me one, and then another, and then another; and I started to learn about birds. And I think it was the warblers that did it for me, you know, the combination of brilliant color, small size and rarity. So, it was sort of like one of those opera conditioning things where, you know, you get this reward, every once in a while, and it keeps you really lusting after the next encounter.

GP: You know, it's interesting, like, I want to sort of step back and tease apart everything that you've been talking about, so far, because, you know, a lot of our listeners are writers – and they might not necessarily be Nature Writers.

In fact, I think we have relatively few Nature Writers who listen to the podcast. But the reason I really wanted you on the show is sort of to tease apart the creative process because so many writers hear, you know, what it's like to write fiction.

But at the end of the day, every project that is driven by passion – whether you're painting pictures of baby birds or writing a thriller about someone who's about to take down the world or something – there's still that passion behind the project.

JZ: Right.

GP: Can you talk a little bit about like what was the highlight in this project? What was that moment where you were like, it took your breath away?

JZ: There are so many. I think, one real peak was when I had to stop working with Bluebirds when they were 12 days old. There's this problem that happens when you're working with birds in a nest; and they reach a certain age – I call it the age of sentience – when, all of a sudden, they have made a mental category of bird and not bird.

And they realize that you are not bird, and they are suddenly afraid of you; and you have to stop working with them at that point because touching them can cause them to jump out of the nest, and we do not want that to happen.

So, I had closed the box on these 12 days old bluebirds and they were so beautiful; and I was doing some of the strongest paintings of my life of these beautiful, mostly feathered birds – and I had to quit.

And then by providence – and there's a lot of that going on in my work – got a call, I was in the middle of guiding a bird walk in Maine of all places. I was not home in Ohio. And I got this call from a couple who had three baby bluebirds that had been orphaned when their mother was hit by a car; and they were dying, and they wanted to know if I would take them.

And I said, 'Well, yes I will, but I can't now, it's going to have to be another week or so before I get home – but here's what you feed them, here's how you keep them a lot.' And I realized, when I got back, that I had this golden opportunity to paint the babies well beyond the 12-day cutoff that had been imposed on me by nature.

So, I did-- I actually did series of paintings of the babies through day 65 because I hand-raised them. So, this was an opportunity, both scientific and artistic, to document their plumage development. They molted into their adult coloration, I painted it; it was fabulous.

And it was just like, I don't know how I got so lucky, you know, but that happened a number of times. I had to take three attempts on Eastern Phoebe before I got a full series on them. The first chicks died of a mite infestation at Day 2. I had to wait another year. They nested again; and I had this elaborate baffle constructed to keep anything off of their nest, which was under our deck on a little relay box.

And a six-foot black rat snake got over the box, and ate them at Day 7. So, here I am, two years in trying to get a Phoebe series; and I've lost the nest twice, through no fault of my own.

The next afternoon – and I was still crying about losing my models at Day 7 – the phone rang and it was a woman who said, "We just tore down a shed and we found these weird-looking fuzzy birds, and do you want them?"

And I said, "Okay – in a shed, weird-looking fuzzy, it's going to be either Carolina Wren or Eastern Phoebe." And she drives up the driveway with two perfect 12-day-old Eastern Phoebe in the nest that were exactly – no, no, I'm sorry, they were like eight days old – they were exactly the right age for me to just pick up the series and keep going.

And I wound up hand-raising those things, and it was a tremendous amount of work. But my God, what an opportunity! So, you know, I get critical just thinking about all these, sort of, Deus ex Machina going on in getting me these models and getting me, you know, know, set up to do this. It's just-- It's like, it's meant to be.

GP: You know, it's interesting though because I think a lot of writers have moments like that, maybe not quite so dramatic. Like their models die and then they get like replacement models the next day. But you know, there are moments where things like-- you know, for me, in my case, I met my agent by chance at a conference I wasn't even planning to be at, but I happened to go to.

I met my publisher when I was nine months pregnant to the day with my son, and I happened to be at a conference. I mean, if I'd gone into labor a few days early, I wouldn't have been there.

So, it's, you know, there are all these like moments of serendipity and, you know, let's face it, the fact that I was nine months pregnant to the day probably was an influential factor. Because, I mean, it's one heck of an icebreaker when people like, you know, it gives you something to introduce yourself with. Like, 'Hey, I'm the nine months pregnant person, how are you?'

[laughter]

JZ: Yeah, you remember me, I was big as a house when we met.

GP: Exactly. I mean, it kind of makes you memorable, right?

JZ: Sure.

GP: It's a sort of a conversation piece, but like, it's one of those things where I think a lot of writers have those experiences.

And a huge part of it is being able to step back and have like a meta vision, and realize that like, 'Yes, this is meant to be, and I have to keep going,' because the other approach is to just be like, 'Oh, my models died at Day 7,' freak out and then not do anything.

JZ: I give up. Yeah.

GP: Exactly.

JZ: I never gave up; and I had much of the same experiences with Starlings, where I had to do three different tries in three different years to get a full series of the bird; but I was going to get it, you know? That was not a problem. It was just part of this process, and passion just spurs you on and on and on.

GP: So, I think, I definitely agree that passion spurs you on, but there's got to be some sort of internal resilience to it as well. I mean, what advice do you give to writers when they are facing those moments, where they don't think they can keep going? How do they stay on track? How do they persevere?

JZ: I guess the thing that I would say is, search yourself and don't do what you think you should, do what you feel you have to – because I felt I had no choice, you know, because the guiding vision was so strong and the passion for doing this project was so strong that it was like I was compelled. And if you feel that, that's what you should be doing.

GP: I love that because that just really, I think it sums up why a lot of writers write. You know, we write not so much because we want to write, but because we can't not write; we just have to do it.

JZ: Perfect. Perfect. We have to, exactly.

GP: So, you've touched on this idea of, you know, having the big idea and then sort of being uniquely qualified to deliver that idea – and sort of your part, sort of, how that's affected you… like the fact that you were the right person in the right place at the right time to do a project like this, but--

JZ: Right.

Gabriela Pereira: As far as, like, when did you realize that this was more than a book? And did you at any moment worry that someone else might try to do this?

JZ: Let me answer the second part first. No, I never worried about it because there's a level of biological illiteracy in the American public right now that's frankly shocking, you know?

So, the thought that anybody else would sort of scoop me on a project this bizarre and this sort of specialized, never even occurred to me and didn't bother me. If I have a blessing, it's that I've never felt competitive toward anyone but myself. If somebody does fabulous bird paintings and they're way better than me, I go, 'Dude, you are fantastic - that is so good, I could never paint like that.'

That's just-- That's just who I am. Because I think that good writing and good painting and drawing elevates us all. It's not something to be envied. And if you're envying someone who you think is better than you, you really need to take a look back into yourself and say, "Look, all I can do is the best thing I can do." There's a quote that I'd really love to read to you; and I've got to do a little bit of clicking around, but I can find it, and it's-- I'm going to do a quick search here.

GP: So, while you look for it, I'm going to-- The reason I ask this question is that something really resonated with me. I think it was in the introduction of the book where you talk about, you know, the fact that like, when you started telling people, "Hey, this is what I'm working on."

They were like, 'Oh my gosh, why didn't someone else think of that?' And in a way, you know, and that sort of reaction that like, it's almost so inevitably obvious that people are like, 'Why didn't anyone else do this before?'

Like, you know, it's almost impossible to conceive that you could be the first at doing something. And the funny thing is, I've had that same experience with DIY MFA; when I first founded DIY MFA or started working on this project, it began as a passion project – now it's my business, it's a company.

JZ:: Yay!

GP: You know, it was one of those things where like I tell people, I'm the founder of DIY MFA; and they're like, how did someone else not think of that first? And my response was like, 'They probably did, they just didn't do anything about it,' you know?

JZ: Well, there you go. Yeah. You had the afterburners on.

GP: Exactly. And so, I think it's one of those things where a lot of times, you know, it's the Occam's razor, like the simplest answer is often, like the most obvious answer is often the right one. Like sometimes things are just obviously in front of your nose, and people just haven't opened their eyes to see it.

JZ: Right.

GP:: I think it's important for writers to realize that, and not worry so much about someone else jumping in on their idea.

JZ: Yeah, just do what you're best at.

GP:: Exactly.

JZ: I remember meeting a bird painter once who absolutely sent me back on my heels when he said-- You know, we've been talking for a while and I really admired his work. He ground and mixed his own paint pigments. And I was like, 'Wow, that's pretty cool.' And I loved his work, and he seemed to like mine.

And then he said, "So, I heard a rumor that you're moving to [this metropolitan area where he lives]." And I said, "No, I don't know where you would've heard that." And he goes, "Oh, phew!" And I go, 'Why?' He goes, 'I didn't need the competition.' And I thought, 'Whoa!'

You know, that's a mindset that I've never had and never will. Like, oh, I don't want anybody as good as me near me. You know, what? I would want somebody near me.

GP: Exactly. For me, competition has always been-- I mean, I don't even think of it as competition, I think more as like co-opetition, you know, like that, oftentimes; the added efforts of being around people who are better than you, can actually elevate your own art, which I think is just awesome.

JZ: Absolutely. Yeah. I have a group of artists that I meet with every year or so, and, in fact, just saw a bunch of them; and we are all very supportive of each other. You know, you look at something somebody's doing and you go, 'God, I should try to--' That's the whole spirit of like, community; without that, you're just a whizzed little raisin painting away, you know?

GP: So, let's talk a little bit more about, you told us the highlights of this project. What was maybe like the biggest downer moment? Not to be like super negative, but like, what was the moment that just like, ugh, right in the heart?

JZ: Well, when I realized it was going to take me another year to finish the paintings to my specifications, [laughs] like it was due in 2014. And I looked at what I had done, and I looked at the pace I was going at, and I was like, 'This isn't going to happen,' because I really needed to really polish the chapters, and I needed to do like three more paintings to make it feel like a full series to me.

So, I just went to my editor and said, "Isn't going to happen." She goes, 'Yeah, I kind of figured,' because he knows me. You know, I mean, so that was a bummer for me; and it was kind of hard to pick myself up and keep going, you know, because I was just like, 'Oh God, I've been working on this for 13 years, can I get it done?' But really, I needed a deadline and I needed a 'You have one more year', and that year just flew.

GP: So, how did you keep yourself going forward? Like, rather than giving up? I mean, 13 years, that's a long time.

JZ: Yeah, it is, but I wasn't-- I wasn't aware that I was working on the book all that time. I was just kind of like, 'La la la, oh, another species to paint,' you know? But then once it got intense, and I was having to like craft these fully realized chapters – and, in many cases, fill in painting bits that I hadn't been able to get sometimes from photos or experience with birds subsequent.

You know, it was just a lot of work in getting it all together. And then, another obstacle that I realized was; I've had some, in my first major book, Letters from Eden, I had like six paintings lost, destroyed, or stolen while they were at the, while they were at the printers, nobody really knew. It seemed to happen where they were being scanned.

And it was kind of odd because they were like the most precious and irreplaceable paintings in the book. One was of newly hatched baby box turtles in like 30 poses. You know, you've seen my stuff. You can imagine it was just this killer painting, disappears.

So, I had to go to my publisher this time and say, "You know what? Nobody's going to ship these paintings anywhere; find a place where I can get them scanned in the states, and I will drive them there." And that's what I did.

GP: That is-- That's super smart though, because I think, you know, there comes a point, like you said, like it's one thing to not buy into the competition, but there's a whole other side to like protecting your stuff. And there comes a point where, like, as a writer or an artist, you have to just say, "You know, the reality is not everyone in the world is going to be, you know, all peaches and cream," there are some bad apples out there, and you've got to protect your work.

JZ: And also, these things were oversized. So, 20 by 30-inch paintings going through the mail are just begging to be pierced.

GP: Oh my gosh. Yes.

JZ: By a forklift or something, you know? You can armor them all you want – but the bigger they are, the more precarious and unwieldy it becomes.

GP: Absolutely. So, what vision do you have for this book? Like, what do you think-- Where do you think it can go from here?

JZ: Well, like The Bluebird Effect, my second book, I really think that this book has crossover appeal because it's got that uniqueness; and it also has that quality of, 'Oh my God, what-- I've never seen anything like this.' You know? That's, I think, its strong suit.

And that's what my agent, who's so sharp, just zeroed in on; he'd never seen anything like it. So, I'm betting that, you know, people who aren't natural history book agents have never seen anything like it.

GP: So, I mean, for a layperson, what do you think a layperson will-- I mean, not to imply that they wouldn't gain something, but like, what do you think a layperson can get out of this book? Because it is so niche, you know what I mean?

So, like, for someone who doesn't know anything-- I mean, I know from my experience when I opened up the book, I was just like, oh my gosh, transported. It was almost like I was transported into one of those old naturalist botany prints from like the 19th century or something.

JZ: Right.

GP: But what was, sort of-- How do you envision your ideal layperson reader engaging with this book?

JZ: I think my ideal person would be somebody who sees the colorful cover of a male cardinal feeding a baby, and goes, 'Huh, baby birds.' And I deliberately titled it Baby Birds instead of Nestlings: Day-by-day or something like that. Because not everybody knows what a nestling is, but everybody has a vision in their head for a baby bird.

So, I thought, 'Let's just go straight to the basics,' you know? And I knew that I risked having Ornithological types go, why would I look at a book that's titled Baby Birds? But that's not actually--

I mean, I know Ornithologists who love my stuff. There are probably also ornithologists who think I'm just some kind of poet painter hack who plays with birds. I don't know. I don't know. I don't really care. What I care about is sharing this immense thing, this miracle that I'm able to see and record uniquely.

I hope that somebody who's attracted by the colorful dust jacket will open the book and go, what? I mean, I just opened it and I opened it to the naked baby Chimney Swifts, and I'm like, 'Whoa, those are weird,' and I painted them. So, that's what I'm hoping.

And then, one of my favorite reviews so far said, "Pick the book up for its gorgeous pictures, but get pulled in by the prose." That was to me the highest praise. I was so happy to read that, because I was like, 'Oh, you get it, don't you? That's great.'

GP: And you know, there's something, I don't want to say voyeuristic – you know, they're baby birds. But like, there's-- But there's something about it that's so, like, behind the scenes; it's such a private bird moment, you know, that like, we get this view of it that most people don't get to see. And so, it's kind of amazing. I mean, it just-- I was definitely transported.

JZ: That's fabulous. Yeah, that's wonderful. And I've heard somebody say that she almost felt like she shouldn't be looking.

GP: Ah-Huh! Yeah.

JZ: Isn't that wonderful?

GP: It's, kind of-- But you do feel that way, I think.

JZ: Sure. Yeah.

GP: So, what do you have on deck? I mean, now that you've finished this massive 13-year project, what's next for you?

JZ: Well, I'm a very linear person. It's really hard for me to see beyond what I'm doing at the moment that I'm in it, which is partly what makes me good at what I do. And right now, I'm just like selling books like crazy out of my studio, and running around and giving talks at nature festivals. And I just finished a 'seven talk in eight days' tour of the Boston area, which was--

GP: Wow.

JZ: -exhausting and exhilarating and fabulous at the same time. My project after this is writing a peon, a memorial – not a eulogy, he's still with me… but I have this great dog, and I know everybody has a great dog. Everybody's dog is special and wonderful, but I've written--

I'm about 60,000 words into a book on him, and I am dying to finish it or bring it to some kind of fruition. And so, that's, I think, probably the next thing that I will sink my teeth into.

GP: Will there be illustrations in the book for your dog?

JZ: That's a very good-- That's a very good question because he's something of an internet celebrity. His name's Chet Baker Boston Terrier – he's named for the jazz musician, Chet Baker. And I don't know, my feeling when I look at a dog book is, I want to see a photo of that exact dog. I'm not sure I want to see a painting of the dog.

So, I'm going back and forth in my mind; I'm an avid photographer, I probably have several thousand fabulous photos of this dog. So, you know, to me it would be a total romp to do a book that I didn't have to paint 500 pictures for.

[laughter]

JZ: It would be great. So, that's, kind of-- That's the little carrot I'm holding in front. And my editor says, "No, no, no, everybody knows you as a painter." And I'm like, 'Okay, well, they need to know me as a photographer too.' [laughs] So much easier.

GP: I know, right? Like, why reinvent the wheel when you've already got this archive of photos?

JZ: Oh, and they're great. He's got a very expressive face and; you know, Boston Terriers, they're just so darn cute.

GP: Aw! So wonderful. Well, I always end each interview with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

JZ: My number one tip for writers is what I ran across and which I found while we were talking, is by the writer André Gide. He's the author of Counterfeiters. He said, "Do not do what someone else could do as well as you. Do not say, do not write what someone else could say, could write as well as you. Care for nothing in yourself but what you feel exists nowhere else. And, out of yourself create, impatiently or patiently, the most irreplaceable of beings."

GP: I love that.

JZ: Me too.

GP: That's just beautiful.

JZ: Yeah. Yeah. It could be a mantra, but it's way too wordy.

[laughter]

GP: But it's absolutely beautiful. I love it. And it just sums it all up so perfectly. It sums up our whole conversation perfectly. So, thank you so much, Julie, for being on the show today. It was wonderful talking to you and getting an inside look at your process.

JZ: I should be so lucky as to get an interviewer, or like you every time. Thank you.

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