

*Jen Calonita*

087: Multiple Paths of a Writing Career

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 dive on in to today's interview, I wanted to tell you about something kind of fun that's going on in the internet right now. So, there's this new podcast series put together by my friends over at Folio Literary Management and the Salt Cay Writers Retreat.

Now, as you probably already know, Folio Literary Management is the agency that represents me; and the Salt Cay Writers Retreat is this wonderful, wonderful retreat run by Karen Dionne and Chris Graham who are the masterminds and fearless leaders of the Backspace Writing Community.

And Backspace, if you haven't heard me gush about this organization already online, they used to run this amazing conference. It was the first conference or one of the first I ever went to, and I went to their very last one before they took a hiatus; and now, they're doing this amazing retreat in Salt Cay, which is in The Bahamas where basically writers get a chance to spend a week writing and workshopping their work with top industry insiders and amazing bestselling authors.

Let me tell you, if I wasn't already looped into a speaking gig that weekend in May, I would so be on a plane for that trip right now because it sounds amazing. Anyway, Folio Literary and Salty Writers Retreat have put together this excellent podcast series called Write Here, Write Now.

Basically, this is a series of recorded audio interviews of in-depth craft discussions with today's best writers. And the idea behind this is that whether you've already published a book or two or many – or you're just getting started or you're just trying to take your writing to the next level – the key always is to hear from award-winning and #1 bestselling authors, and get their advice and their input.

Of course, I don't know about you, but I don't have #1 bestselling authors on speed dial. So, that's where this podcast series comes in. It's an opportunity for you to hear exclusive interviews with top publishing professionals – and also with award-winning and bestselling authors, and hear them talk nuts and bolts about the craft of writing.

I hope you will head on over and check out this free podcast series. To get access to it, head over to diymfa.com/saltcay, and that'll redirect you to a page where you can sign up and get access to those recordings. Again, that's diymfa.com/saltcay S-A-L-T C-A-Y. I hope you'll head over there and check this out because this is a truly amazing opportunity.

Before we dive into today's interview, I wanted to remind you that the show notes will be over at diymfa.com/087 because it's Episode 87. All right, now, let's dive into our interview.

Hello, hello, word nerds, Gabriela here; and I am absolutely thrilled to be talking to you all today. Today, I've got Jen Calonita on the line, and she is an author of both YA and Middle Grade who knows a lot about the inside scoop on Hollywood – and started out by chronicling the backstage life at Justin Timberlake concerts, interviewing Zac Efron on film sets...you name it.



And this work ultimately inspired her very first series, *Secrets of My Hollywood Life*, which has been published in nine countries; and it's a series of YA. After that, Jen tackled lots of other topics in worlds that were familiar to her...things like summer camp stories in her *Sleepaway Girls* and *Summer State of Mind* series – or *Reality TV*, which is another topic she covered for magazines and she wrote about that in *Reality Check*.

But it wasn't until she wrote *Belles*, which is a book about two polar opposite girls who have this like life-altering secret going on between them that she really entered a world that was totally different from her own.

And from there, it was just another small step for Jen to shift gears and start writing Middle Grade instead of YA. So, today, I've got Jen on the line, and we're going to be talking about like the whole author-career ecosystem...and how an author, in Jen's case, how she went through making all of these big career changes and deciding like where she wanted to go next.

And also talking about shifting gears from one very different category in writing to another, even though it sounds like YA and Middle Grade are the same, you guys know me well enough to know that they are very, very different areas of writing. So, we're going to talk to Jen about making that switch as well. So, welcome, Jen, I am so thrilled to have you on the call today.

Jen Calonita: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

GP: Awesome. So, as I mentioned, I wanted to talk about kind of switching gears from one niche of writing to another, but before we dive into that, can you give us a little more context about your career? How did you get started writing for magazines, and then what prompted you to make that leap from magazines to books?

JC: Well, it never occurred to me that wanting to be a writer, I could ever be an author. It seems like today, whenever I meet a kid or a teen who wants to be a writer, they immediately talk about wanting to write books.

I always assumed, because as a kid this was pre-internet, I always assumed if you wanted to be a writer you went and worked in a newspaper or a magazine. So, that's really what I focused on doing. When I was a teen, I would write to different teen magazines, ask if they needed reporters; I would write for a local newspaper.

And when I went off to college, I studied all kinds of newspaper reporting journalism and got an internship at YM magazine, which was a teen magazine...and was just hooked and thought, this is where I belong, this is where I'm supposed to be.

So, when I graduated, I got a job at a magazine called *Mademoiselle*, which was kind of like glamor. It had been around 75 years. I worked there and got my feet wet, and then I moved over to *People* magazine's teen magazine, which was called *Teen People*. And I always like to say I hope I'm not cursed because none of the magazines I worked at are still around, but I really loved my job; it was a lot of fun.

GP: You know, it's funny that you mentioned YM because that was the very first magazine I read as a teenager, and I remember like my friends and I in like seventh grade pouring over the pages. So, like, I totally hear you on, sort of, how enticing that world can be.

So, what prompted you to then shift gears to writing books? I mean, clearly, there's a link between the types of books you write and the background that you had, the stuff you were reporting on. What actually triggered you to like switch over?



JC: Well, for a number of years when I was at Teen People, I really focused on movies and television, and I got to interview a lot of teen stars on their way up. And one thing I found really interesting was they all loved their job – but at the same time, you could tell it could be a little bit exhausting.

They never really had a day off. They never really had a moment where they weren't plugged in. Somebody's always watching everything they do. And I always use this analogy; if you or I went out to dinner tonight and we went to someplace like Chili's and I had a hamburger fell out of the bun onto my shirt, you might laugh at me, but no one else in the restaurant is probably going to notice.

But if you are a young star like Selena Gomez, everybody's going to take your picture...it's going to wind up on Instagram tonight, it's going to show up on all the daily gossip blogs tomorrow, it could show up in a magazine next week.

So, I started really thinking about what that would be like to always be on and always have someone watching you. And it's what made me start thinking about the book *Secrets of My Hollywood Life*, which was my first book; and that was the first time I had ever thought about writing a book.

And not knowing how to write anything longer than maybe 1500 words, it was definitely very intimidating. So, I definitely took baby steps before I got there and started writing.

GP: So, let's talk about those baby steps because I think, I mean, writing a novel, period, is intimidating; and I think like listeners to this show can relate to that for sure. But how does-- Like, how did you actually train yourself from writing 1500-word articles to learning how to sustain a story for an entire book?

JC: Well, I will say I was extremely, extremely blessed and fortunate because I did something that a lot of people might say is naive, but I'm always someone who says, "It never hurts to ask a question".

And so, when I started thinking about writing a book, I thought, "Who can I ask about book writing?" And Teen People Magazine happened to be in the same building as Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, and I called upstairs and actually said, "I'm an entertainment editor, I would love to write a book about being a teen celebrity, I've never written a book...can I take an editor out for coffee and just pick their brain?"

And an editor said, yes. And we sat down and started talking, and she said, "You know what? This sounds intriguing. We haven't done anything like this. Let me send you some ideas, a proposal so you know how to begin."

And a proposal really was a great first step for me because I noticed that for YA books, at least at the time... they wanted a chunk of the book 50, 60, 70 pages, and they wanted an outline of the entire story. So, I needed to go home and craft that story, and just think of it in terms of an outline.

And that's how I started; I kind of look at every outline, like a puzzle that needs to be solved. I might have a ton of pieces, and I'm never quite sure where they belong; and I keep moving them around until they make sense.

Sometimes I have extra puzzle pieces, so to speak. I want way too much to happen and there's just not enough room, so I might save puzzle pieces for another puzzle or I might find there's certain pieces that just don't fit and maybe they don't belong in the story.

So, I really worked on that. I worked on the outline, then I sat down and started writing my first few chapters of the book. And I found since I knew I wanted it to be about Hollywood and a star kind of



navigating Hollywood and trying to have a normal life, I thought it would be really fun, at the time, to reveal Hollywood secrets I had learned from interviewing celebrities...things I knew, but the reader might not.

Now, today, we have so many weekly magazines; and there's so much more going on the internet than there was even 12 years ago when I published that first book. So, it was kind of exciting to read about celebrity secrets, things you didn't know. So, that was a great marketing tool for me, and it was a great way to frame every chapter in the book around a celebrity secret; and it just worked.

Once I had an idea I loved, I just kind of set off on it and I wrote the proposal...and I wound up giving it to that editor at Little, Brown. And it definitely, we went back and forth for several months. I did several drafts, several different versions, but she wound up hiring me to write my first two *Secrets of My Hollywood Life* novels – and she was my editor for the first, I want to say, 10 books I ever wrote. So, making that phone call was probably the best decision I ever made.

GP: That's amazing. And I want to highlight a couple of things you said because the first thing I want to highlight for our listeners is this idea of like the rules of writing, right? Like, even 12 years ago, when you first reached out and you wrote this book on proposal...I mean, it's very rare for, even in 2002, 2003, whenever that was for a debut author to be writing a book on proposal unless they had, like, a gigantic platform.

JC: Right.

GP: But it still doesn't mean it can't be done. And so, I think that's like the first thing is like just because the rules say that you're supposed to publish a certain way and that there's a specific path to how to do it, doesn't necessarily mean that writers have to do it.

Now, I'm not going ahead and advocating every single listener on this call to like call up editors at publishing houses and try to like get in on a proposal, that's not my point. My point is to sort of underscore this idea that like...if you have a way to get your book on the page, just because someone else says that's not how it's done is not a good reason not to try it.

And the second thing I want to underscore is just like the act of picking up the phone and asking because I think so many writers are terrified and scared of asking for help. And I know I was scared when I first started, you know, when I came back to writing in earnest in 2007 was, sort of, the first time I decided, 'This is it...I'm going to-- I'm going to be a writer.'

I didn't know what to do, but like I would go up and ask for ridiculous things or things I thought were ridiculous...like, 'Hey, can I take you out for coffee and pick your brain?' And I thought this was like this huge imposition; and yet, people would say, yes.

And I think that a lot of writers are afraid to make that ask because they think that asking is somehow wrong. The truth is, the other person can always say, no. Like if you're out of line, the other person will tell you like, 'Sorry, I can't do that.' But you'll never know until you ask. And you know, asking nicely is so...for me, it's like hands-down, the one thing that has propelled my own career – is just asking people nicely for things.

JC: Yes. And realizing that you may, you know, you should be nice to everyone because you never know when your paths are going to cross again. My internship at YM was under an editor who I noticed went to a startup called *Teen People Magazine*; and she was running the Entertainment Department, which was my dream department to write for, and I wound up sending her a letter.

I had stayed in her good graces at the internship, stayed in touch with her, and when *Teen People* started, I actually wrote her a letter and said, "Hi, don't know if you remember me, I was your intern... if anything ever opened up, I'd love to come in and interview for it."



And she did, and I wound up getting a job in her department. So, you will cross paths with people in the same industry again and again, whether you like it or not. So, it's always best to put your best foot forward because you want them to remember you in a positive way.

GP: Absolutely, I wholeheartedly agree. And I think, also, that kind of ties into this other thing that like in writing, people either approach the industry with sort of the scarcity mindset...that like if I get an opportunity, someone else doesn't get that opportunity.

I myself try to approach the publishing worlds with an abundance mindset; the idea that like if we all help each other out, everyone wins together.

And so, I think having this sort of positive attitude of, you know, helping other writers, like I love helping writers who are; you know, not quite where I'm at now – and also helping writers who maybe miles ahead of where I am, but like that sort of collegial. And I think in writing you get a lot of that, but you have to sort of seek it out too.

JC: Absolutely. And I think, I mean, just before our phone call, I was on the phone with a writer friend; and she was telling me about a few school visits she was doing in coming weeks, and she said, "I'll put you in touch with these schools because they were great schools to visit, and they did a lot of book pre-sales."

And so, I said, "And I have these schools here that I thought would be really good for you." It's nice to be able to help each other because I think we all come from the same place where we're never quite sure what we're really doing.

And once we learn something that works, we want it to work for everyone else too because it just helps all of us as an industry to sell more books. So, I believe we can learn so much from each other; and it's just so good to reach out to other writer friends and get their advice, and their ideas as well.

GP: Absolutely. It's funny that you mentioned that conversation with your friend because I literally had pretty much the same exact type of conversation with a colleague of my own on Friday; and we were like, 'So, what are you doing, and how can I help you?' And vice versa.

So, like, it's so important I think to have colleagues and like, especially since writing is so isolating, right? Like, we're alone in a room staring at a computer for very, very many hours. So, how did you make these writing friends, in the first place?

JC: Well, I think, for me, you know, I started doing events. For the first few books, you know, my publisher would send me out for events; and they found that a lot of times if you were on a book panel, more people would show up because they might not know me because I'm a debut author, but they might know one of the other authors on the panel.

And once we started connecting, we started doing more and more things together, and getting in touch with each other. And I have a few author friends that I'm very close with now where whenever I have an idea, I might shoot it to them first and say, "What do you think about this? What's missing? What's good, what's not?"

And now, we critique each other's work; and I find it so helpful to have that because like you said, it can be so isolating. You never know if what you're working on anyone else is going to like except you.

And so, it's nice to have somebody to bounce ideas off of, other than your editor because your editor a lot of times is really busy...is working on a lot of books, and you want your work to be as good as



it can be when it gets to her. Or if you're sending out a proposal, you want it to be in the best shape it can be in so that someone's interested in working with you on it.

So, it's just nice to have people that I've met over the years that I stay in touch with to really just work with and help each other. And I really find that every few months, we'll go out to lunch or we'll go out for dinner or we'll just call – or we'll email to stay in touch and see where everybody's at, and what they need help with and what they're working on next. So, I really appreciate having that group so much.

GP: That's awesome. So, what advice would you give to writers – say, someone who's just starting out and who doesn't, you know, speak on panels or have these sort of already built ways to connect with other writers? Where would a writer like that look for this type of community?

JC: I think they would immediately-- They would start going to things like book signings, book events; it's a great place to meet other authors. The New York City Teen Author Reading Nights, those are a great place for me to meet other authors as well.

GP: And by the way, that's where Jen and I-- Sorry to interrupt, but that's where Jen and I met, by the way, listeners.

JC: Exactly. And those are great places because you're meeting a crowd of people who are like-minded who either want to publish a book, have published a book, or just love books; and it's a great place to make connections.

I know a lot of times I work with an adult writing group, and they're always saying, "Ah, there's no way I'm going to get a book published."

And I said, "Are you kidding? Every time I go hear another author speak, I realize how extremely fortunate I was because there are authors out there who've had over 200 rejection letters, before they got an idea off the ground."

And you know, I think of the rejection letters, I even got this year on ideas that didn't work for me. I think, you know, we're all learning from each other; and it's nice to know that there's other people out there who are in the same position as you.

So, I always introduce myself on panels. If somebody seems similar to me or someone I might get along with just like a new friend, I might give my card or ask the email or have coffee. It's just a great place.

Whenever you can go to a panel, a book festival, a reading at a store, you can go up to the author at the end too and just say, "Hi, I'm an author or I'm an aspiring author and I loved what you had to say" ...or "I loved this book you wrote" ...or whatever it is you truly did love, they will love to hear that. And you might make a connection that will last for a long time.

GP: It's so, so, so true. And you know, the other thing too that writers may not be aware of, but aside from like these are-- They're definitely a lot of events that are out there for free. Like the Teen Author Reading Night, going to book signings, things like that where you don't have to pay an admission fee.

But if you go to a conference which, you know, often these conferences can get pricey – so, I always like to add that caveat – but that is also a great way to meet both well-established published authors and also meet other writers who are in the same place as where you are if you're just starting out... meeting other newer writers and forging those connections, creating a critique group.

So, kind of being aware that there are a lot of places where you can meet your 'birds of a feather', as it were.



JC: Mm-Hmm. Very true.

GP: So, let's switch gears a little bit and talk about moving from one niche of book-writing to another. So, you started out writing YA, and you did a number of series by the way. Have you ever written a standalone book or has everything been series, that you've written?

JC: It's funny, I really do-- I find my mind just kind of moves towards series rather than a standalone story. But *Reality Check* was a standalone book; and *Sleepaway Girls* was originally a standalone book...it now has a companion that is not really a sequel, more like a follow-up. So, I guess those two would be considered standalones.

But no, for the most part, I find I like a continuing story. It's the kind of thing I want to read in Middle Grade and YA. And so, I guess that's the kind of thing I find I want to write.

GP: So, let's talk a little bit about this idea of like series versus standalone. Like, what are some of the advantages of writing a series versus writing a book that's its own unit?

JC: I think for me, I love watching a character grow and change over an extended period of time. For example, in the *Fairy Tale Reform School* series, when we meet my main character Gilly; she is a pickpocket, she is prejudice against royals – she cannot stand the princesses in charge of her kingdom...and she just, she's a little bit of a know-it-all and sarcastic.

And it was funny to watch how she changed over the course of the first book, but by no means was she now this happy go-lucky sweet little girl, she still had a lot of growing to do.

And so, it's been fun to see how she's changing and how she's progressing; and yet, what traits she's holding onto from her past, as I write Book 2 and I write Book 3 in the series; and that's always so fun for me.

And I do find with Middle Grade, particularly, kids, if they love a character, they don't want to let go of that character either; they want to keep reading about them, they want to see what adventures they're going to have next.

So, I think we went through a period of time...well, especially in YA, where you needed to have a very clear picture of where a series was going, whether you were selling it as a trilogy or a two-book series or whatever it was you were doing. Whereas in middle grade, I find if it's the type of story that lends itself to more adventures, you can keep going a little bit longer; and I enjoy that about it.

GP: I totally agree. And I remember being that kid in like, you know, fourth, fifth grade...and like, I would go and I'd find the author, the shelf of the author I loved at the library, and literally start at Book 1 and read every single one. So, I totally agree with you that for a lot of kids, especially, I think, in that middle grade age range, having that continued connection, I think, is really important.

JC: Yes. And I mean, for me, when I was younger, the big series for me was *Sweet Valley High*; and there must be almost 200 books. It would drive my mom crazy because I would need a new one every other day in the summer, but I loved it.

I didn't want to let go of Jessica and Elizabeth. I could have stayed with them for years. So, I was very happy having continuing stories with them. So, it's definitely, I think just the way my mind works; I love a continuing series.



GP: I think there's-- It's also, you made an interesting point about how in YA, especially like you kind of had to have this like trilogy thing; and in Middle Grade, you can have much more of that episodic. I mean, you can still have series for YA – but it's very different to write like a trilogy where there's clearly a defined arc across the entire, you know, series.

Or like the Harry Potter series, it's seven books, but there's still a clear beginning, middle, and end to that package.

JC: Yeah.

GP: However, you look at a Sweet Valley High or any of these books that are kind of more episodic in nature, kind of like, you know, even like a mystery series where each one is like its own little episode and then it ends and then the next episode begins.

So, is it the thought process different for you as a writer when you are conceiving of an episodic style series – versus a more sort of narrative arc series or a narrative thrust kind of thing?

JC: I think for me, I don't know if it's because I am a TV junkie, and so I love a series – but I kind of, I know each story I want to tell in a self-contained way. So, even when I was working on the second book in the Fairy Tale Reform School series, as I was writing the book and as I was coming up with ideas, there were other things I wanted to happen that didn't fit within the story.

So, I would start taking notes in my writer's notebook or, I love Sticky Notes. I would start coming up with Sticky Notes of other things I knew had to happen in this world that could not happen in this book; and it helps me start forming ideas for the next book.

And I find that's happening even now as I work on the third book in this series, I find myself writing in new mysteries that I see could carry the story onto a fourth book. I definitely think you get to a point where in your head, you know how many stories you can tell about a group of characters.

And when I was working on the Secrets of My Hollywood Life series, I definitely knew when it was time to let Kaitlin go and where I wanted to send her off. But I think that's just the way my brain is wired; I can kind of tell if I think it should go on – or it, again, should just be another episode in the life.

It's kind of like all those Disney Channel's sitcoms my kids like, they could stick with them forever as long as there's something new and cool happening in each episode. And so, I look at it like that. If there's something new and cool I could still envisioning happening, then I want to continue on with the characters in the series.

GP: Love it. So, let's talk a little bit about the other big shift. I mean, you've made several shifts, you've shifted from YA to Middle Grade; and then once you entered this Middle Grade realm, you went from realistic or reality-based stuff to...OMG, fairy tales.

JC: Yes.

GP: What prompted you to go that way? Like so your VIP-- Did VIP come before Fairy Tale Reform School or was that after?

JC: No, it actually came out after, Fairy Tale Reform School came out first. And I think, for me, the shift from YA to Middle Grade was easier than you'd think...only because I find my YA is very young



YA, it would almost be considered tween. I've always written very clean-- A lot of librarians call it Clean Teen.

It's definitely a bit younger...when I read the YA that's out there now and it's definitely almost on the verge of adult, and I love that and it's amazing and so truthful – but it's not necessarily the kind of writing I think I could pull off at this point.

I find my mind skews younger, and so it made sense to make my characters younger as well. And so, it was definitely a natural progression. I do have children that are in first and fifth grade, so I'm very tuned into that world and their problems and the issues going on in it.

And having two boys, they really wanted to know when I was going to write something that they could read – and they wanted something that had a lot of cool male characters in it because most of my older books really focused on a female protagonist and some of her female problems.

And so, they wanted something that was a little bit more varied and for their taste. And I started thinking about fairy tales, and how much I loved them at their age. But I was always that kid who was more focused on the villain.

I definitely was a good girl, but I always worried about the villain – even if they really deserve the outcome they got, I would ask my mom where they went. And in the original fairy tales, a lot of the villains have a very sad demise – but sometimes they just kind of disappear, and you don't know what's happened to them.

And so, I would be that kid who would ask my mom, "What happened to the wicked stepmother? Where'd she go? Is she in Fairy Tale Jail? The wicked stepsisters, are they banished from the kingdom? Where did they all go?"

And so, when I started thinking about a book, I started thinking, "Wouldn't it be interesting if the Wicked Stepmother turned over a new leaf, opened up a Fairy Tale Reform School and recruited other villains to turn over a new leaf as well and work there?"

And the idea just kind of snowballed from there. And I created a lot of young boy characters that I knew my boys would really like. And I did stick with a female protagonist for the lead because I just kind of could see her from the very beginning as the girl whose story I wanted to tell; and it just went from there.

And it definitely was nerve-wracking at first because, like you said, I've always done Realistic Fiction, and I thought, 'Oh my goodness, how do you create a whole new world?'

But then I realized the beauty of that is I could kind of do anything I wanted. And so, it was very freeing; and now, I really, really enjoy it...and I'm having a lot of fun with it.

GP: Well, the other thing that I love about Fairy Tale Reform School is that you took like-- I mean, there are a lot of people and a lot of stuff out there on fairy tales right now. Like you've got all these TV shows of like, you know, the sort of alternate version or the real version of X Y, Z Fairy Tales.

But you gave it this totally different spin, this idea of like the redemption theme is baked right into the pie from the very beginning and kind of giving it, sort of showing, yeah, the redemption side of these villains. So, can you talk a little bit more about how you put the whole story idea together?

JC: And one thing I do want to say about all that, especially for your listeners, is what's so funny is when I came up with the Fairy Tale idea at first a lot of people said, "There's a lot on fairy tales out there right now, I don't know if this is going to sell."



And I kept saying, “But I haven’t seen anything with a school run by villains”... but everybody said, “Well, it’s such a saturated market”. And I will tell you I had a lot of rejections for this series, and I thought this is such a bummer.

And then Sourcebooks, who is a smaller publisher or was so at the time, just loved it from the minute they read it; and they said, “We want to do this with you.” And they have just knocked it out of the park. I’m so glad this series is with them, they’ve been amazing and so supportive of it, and that has been wonderful to see.

But that’s something I always say to other friends is, you know, “Don’t be upset if you get rejections, it’s just kind of like restaurants...one person’s going to love it and the next person’s going to hate it, you just have to find somebody else who loves it enough to want to work with you on it.”

And for me, I just, I knew right away that if I had a school run by villains, it always had to be a little bit of a murky thing going on where my kids who tell the story never quite know if they can trust their teachers in charge because of their former background.

And so, that really makes it fun to play off of in every book...just, is this person telling the truth? Are they not telling the truth? And how can these students who are in Fairy Tale Reform School for the wrongs they have committed, how can they pull from their strengths, which do come from a place, I guess, of deceit, but use them for the greater good?

And so, we’re always trying to figure out that story with Gilly, like what her hero’s journey is and how sometimes just because you start off bad doesn’t mean you’re going to wind up that way. And I just like figuring out her progressing story with every new book.

GP: I love that. And I love what you said also about, sort of, understanding that rejection is part of the process; and also this ties back to that very first thing that we talked about...just because someone says that this is the way it is, doesn’t mean it has to be that way.

And you know, just because everyone else was saying, “You know what, there’s a lot of Fairy Tale stuff out there”, doesn’t mean that there wouldn’t be an amazing publisher who would jump on this series and do an amazing job with it. So, I think it just kind of ties right back to where we started.

JC: There’s been, I mean, so many other fairy tale books since then. When I see them I think, ‘Well, you know, fairy tales are classic, they’re eternal.’ And so, I still see so many more coming out each day and I just think, ‘You go, fairy tale’, because there’s really room for everyone as long as you can come up with a new concept, any new idea.

GP: Exactly. Not to mention the fact that if somebody loves your Fairy Tale series, they might love another author’s Fairy Tale series, and vice versa.

JC: Absolutely.

GP: So, there’s all of that like rising tide lifts all boats aspect to it as well. So, one of the things that I always think about with writing Middle Grade and writing YA, and I remember you talked a little bit about this when I heard you speak at the Teen Author Reading Night, but this idea of coming from... like remembering what we love to read and what stories we loved as teenagers or as kids, but then also kind of making it fresh as adults.



Because let's face it, I'm not a teenager, you're not a teenager; you know, we're certainly not kids. What we experienced when we were reading similar books is very different from what a lot of kids are experiencing now. So, what has-- What's been your process to kind of keep the story fresh but still hold on to that, you know, Colonel, that holds true from back when you were a younger reader?

JC: Well, I think, for example, like the VIP series, for me that just seemed like the next natural step...when I thought of what I'd want to write about, I thought about how much I loved the band when I was 12.

And again, another thing that seems to be eternal is boy bands, there is always a new boy band; they were there when I was younger, they were there now, they will be there when my kids are adults. And so, for me, I thought, 'Well, what did you love about boy bands?'

And I just loved the band so much, my dream would've been to go on the road with them. And so, I thought, that would make a really fun book – but I was able to pull from the emotions I had as a kid. I was also able to even pull a storyline from my own life, and the boy band I loved as a kid, and add that to the story.

And I felt like that gave the story a little bit of weight, and definitely some truth to it because the main character is the closest I've ever come to writing a girl like myself – someone who had a strong group of friends, but who still always got really shy around new people or never knew the right thing to say if someone was a little bit mean to them...or who could be a little bit clumsy or a little bit emotional.

And it was fun to explore a girl like myself; and yet, see through my kids and all their friends that there's girls like that there today as well. Like, it never really changes. At the core, you all still have the same fears, the same insecurities, and the same wants. And so, it just felt right. It felt like the next thing I should be working on.

GP: So, how do you update-- Like keeping those core emotional threads, how do you then sort of update the packaging? Because obviously, when you were, you know, when you loved a boy band as a younger person, there weren't cell phones, I'm assuming.

JC: Right.

GP: There wasn't Instagram and all that other stuff. But like, I mean, obviously, there's research that writers can do, but how do you get into that sort of like, immediacy of what teens and kids are experiencing? I mean, maybe do your kids play into that research in some way? How do you do it?

JC: They definitely, definitely play a part into the research when they come home and they tell me about things going on, problems going on...you know, the shows they're watching, what they want to play on their iPads. But I also found when I wanted to talk about a boy band, my best friend owns a series of dance studios out here on Long Island; and the girls all love One Direction.

So, I said to her one day, "Could I come in during a dance class and when they're on break, sit down and just kind of pick their brain?" And she said, "Absolutely."

And so, for a while, I was going in every few weeks and just sitting down with them and saying, "Okay, why do you love One Direction? Why do you love 5 Seconds of Summer? What's so amazing about them? What don't you like about them?"

And they were just amazing. And these kids would sit there and they would tell me why they followed One Direction's friends on Instagram, and why they followed certain bloggers on Twitter – and how they didn't eat, let's say, carrots because one of the lead singers didn't eat carrots and was afraid of them.



And those things all kind of shaped my new, you know, 2016 boy band that I had in my head, and kind of updated them for a new generation. These girls were my people. We definitely had the same emotions; I just needed to apply those emotions to, you know, today's world.

And so, you definitely want to stay in touch with the kids you're writing about...and just kind of see what they're into and why, and use that in your stories. And for me, it really helped shape VIP a lot.

GP: I love it. So, VIP: I'm With the Band, that's the first one of the series and it's out now, correct?

JC: Yes.

GP: And Fairy Tale--

JC: The Battle of the Bands will be out in July, and that's the sequel.

GP: Awesome. And Fairy Tale Reform School, the first one came out last year.

JC: Last March, that one's called Flunked, and Charmed will be out March 1st; and then next March will be Tricked...and that one follows Rumpelstiltskin coming to town.

GP: Oh, that sounds really fun.

JC: It is fun.

GP: So, that's what's next for you. Do you see any other series projects on the horizon or are you going to just ride along with these characters for a while?

JC: Oh gosh, I hope so. I feel like as a writer you always are looking ahead, you're always thinking about what's next. Because by the time a book comes out in stores, you might be done writing that series.

You know, I've got my handy writer's notebook and I have a ton of ideas in it, and I'm trying to figure out which one is really sticking with me enough to pursue. It's definitely Middle Grade again, but I'm just trying to figure out what's the best thing for me to work on...and the best thing, I think, my readers would enjoy reading.

GP: I love it. So, I always end every interview with the same question; what is your number one tip for writers?

JC: Carry a writer's notebook everywhere and keep it at your bedside because you never know when the next great idea is going to strike, and you're going to want to have a pen and paper so you can write it down.

GP: What does your writer's notebook look like, by the way? Is it like a--

JC: Well, they change. My latest writer's notebook is pale-green; and it has beach quotes on the front, says, "Beach rules – kick back, relax, breathe, float away". And I definitely feel like my ideas seem to take on a summer state of mind lately. And so, it just felt like the perfect next writer's notebook; and hopefully, in here, is my next great idea.

GP: I love it. Well, thank you so much for being on the show, Jen. It's been a blast chatting with you.

JC: Thank you so much for having me.

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

