

*Amy Lea*

409: Social Media Influencers and the Millennial Romance Novel

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.

Lori Walker: Hey y'all, Lori here and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. In case we haven't met yet; I am Operations Maven, Chaos Coordinator, and Podcast Producer at DIY MFA. If you've been listening along, you may remember that Gabriela recently passed the baton to me to start co-hosting episodes of the show.

Well, here we are, back for another show. Now, before we dive in, our show notes are at diymfa.com/409 because it's Episode 409. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, Stitcher Radio, Spotify, all those places where you might listen to a podcast, and leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

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Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Amy Lea. Amy is a Canadian bureaucrat by day and contemporary romance author by night (and on weekends). She writes laugh-out-loud romantic comedies featuring strong heroines, witty banter, mid-2000s pop culture references, and happily ever afters.

In this interview, we are talking about her debut novel *Set on You*, out now from Berkley Romance Publishing. It is so great to have you here today, Amy.

Amy Lea: Hi Lori, thank you so much for having me.

LW: I'm so excited. I've been reading your book. I'm about halfway through, so we got to avoid the spoilers, but I am absolutely loving it so far.

AL: Thank you for saying that. I appreciate it.

LW: Oh my God, it's been a blast to read. I've been having a hard time focusing on work because I'd rather be reading.

AL: [laughs] Hey, that's every author's goal--

LW: Right? I think so.



AL: -to take everybody away from their productivity.

[laughter]

LW: Yes. Avoid work, read; and of course, you have the nice weather we've been having lately hasn't been helping but--

AL: Exactly.

LW: Anyway, let's go ahead and dive on in. Why don't you tell me the story behind the story; like, how you came to be a writer, and how you came up with this idea for this novel?

AL: Sure, yeah, I'll go right into it. I've been writing fiction basically since I was old enough to write full sentences in crayons. I used to use my dad's computer paper and just kind of draw photos and then do my writing, kind of like a children's novel on the bottom. And I used to staple that together, and then give it to my parents to read.

And so, once I became a little bit older, I evolved; you know, hopped on the family desktop and started writing, you know, angst teen love triangle romances that never saw the light of day – and in strange fonts as well.

LW: Oh yeah.

AL: But even more so, I was a pretty avid reader. So, by the time that I reached university/college age, my creative writing and reading life sort of flatlined because once you get into college, your academics responsibilities are piling up and you're reading textbook after textbook – so, leisure reading, kind of, you know, just sort of fell to the wayside, unfortunately.

And it wasn't until after I finished grad school that my love for reading, particularly romance, kind of, reignited. And one of the things that I noticed when I was walking through, you know, the Brick & Mortar bookstores, was that there were now characters who looked like me on the covers.

So, I still remember the day that I saw Lara Jean on the cover of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* by Jenny Han, which is a Young Adult novel. And I remember being surprised because until then, it seemed like main character status in Happily-Ever-Afters were really reserved for white characters.

And, you know, that's when I knew that there was something really special about the romance genre, in particular. And so, I started reading more Contemporary Romance, you know, way more than I used to.

And eventually, I couldn't ignore, you know, that knowing urge to give somebody else an escape like my favorite books had given me. And you know, I really missed writing fiction and reading, which I hadn't done in years, aside from crafting random scenarios in my head.

And so, one day, I just decided, 'I'm going to do it.' So, I opened up a Word document and started typing. And so, I wrote two pretty cringy books that will never see the light of day, right off the top. [laughs]

And I kind of wrote them, you know, just totally past it just went, had no outline, no skeleton, no idea where the story was going to go. And I also hadn't done any market research really in terms of, you know, what kinds of things were selling. And also, and most interestingly, the main characters in those two first books were White.

And I think it was part of the reason that it never occurred to me, still, to write somebody that actually



looked like me was, you know, I had never seen a lot of people who were Asian in mainstream media growing up. And I think, you know, like I said, if you don't see people who look like you, you kind of believe that you're not worthy of being a main character in your own life.

LW: Mm-Hmm.

AL: And so, it never occurred to me to write somebody who actually did look like me. And finally, once I started seeing the diversity come out with a lot of the Contemporary Romance increments, particularly in Berkley, I started to realize, why, why not? Why wouldn't I write somebody who shares my experiences?

And so, writing Crystal, who's the main character in Set On You – she's half-Chinese half-white – it kind of felt so much more personal when I was writing her, even though she, as a character, is totally different from me.

And while I always try to keep my personal life totally separate from the fiction that I write, it would still be a stretch to say that all of her experiences weren't, at least, partially derived from bits and pieces of what I've experienced personally.

And so, I think that book, in particular, was-- It felt right, and it was the book that got me my agent and got the deal. And yeah, I guess, aside from the identity portion of it, the inspiration for that book, in particular, kind of started with me spending time in the gym, people-watching. [laughs] Just kind of watching people while I was on the treadmill or the elliptical.

And as a romance reader, I usually can try to find inspiration for love wherever I go. Mm-Hmm. And in particular, I was sweating in a spin class and it came to me that, you know, the gym would be a really great place to meet somebody.

And I thought that, in addition, it would be a perfect setting for, you know, enemies-to-lovers shenanigan because I think whenever there's an opportunity for a 'meet cute', there's always an opportunity for 'meet not so cute'.

[laughter]

AL: And so, while the gym is generally a positive space, it's also I think a strongship setting for competition, ample opportunities to outrun or out-lift the person next to you, particularly if you have a competitive streak like Crystal and Scott who are the main characters in the book.

And so, I kind of used that to my advantage and, you know, made a list of pet peeve that people have, and used that as the easy way to add tension between the characters. And so, yeah, that's where the idea all started.

LW: Wow.

[laughter]

AL: I know, I'm sorry, that was a lot.

LW: No, like, that was fantastic. I mean, it really kind of flushed things out and really provided so many great segues for some of the questions that I've kind of plotted out for this conversation. So, now I'm just like, where do I want to dive in?



[laughter]

LW: I guess, you know, I'll go ahead and start with this one. One of the things that you mentioned is setting it in a gym. And one of the things that I noticed as I was reading it-- I mean, even from the very first page, because you've got that pre-note-- I forgot what exactly you called it, was it a trigger warning?

AL: Oh, right. The author's note? Yeah.

LW: The author's note, yeah. I mean, one of the things that I've noticed is that you really subtly weave in a lot of commentary about emotional intelligence, like wanting to give someone time to process a breakup, but it's also just not just around the budding romance between our enemies to lovers.

You've also got it, you know, like holding the gym as a safe place for yourself and body positivity; and then, even just conversations about introversion and extroversion. So, why was that emotional intelligence stuff just so important for you to include?

AL: Are you referring to the author note, in particular, or the themes within?

LW: I mean, both really.

Amy Lea: Okay.

LW: I like that you took that time to talk about, you know, your focus is on body positivity and the gym has been like a safe place for you, but you understand that it's not for everybody and you know, just all sorts of body image issues.

AL: Right, right.

LW: Yeah, both in the author's note, but then also just within the text.

AL: Sure. Yes. I mean, I think Crystal's character came to me pretty soon after the gym setting. I'm always drawn to strong main characters in romance. And when I was thinking of somebody that would be a fitness enthusiast or, you know, somebody who's a pinnacle of strength and confidence in the gym, I thought that it would be really interesting to capture somebody who kind of defies societal norm – as, you know, a curvy or mid-sized fitstagrammer, a personal trainer that doesn't work out with the mindset of losing weight, but with the view that health and wellness is more about weight.

And so, you know, like I said, despite being this idol in the body, positive body acceptance fitness community, and despite the privilege that she has that comes with being midsized and fit, she still has her moments of doubt in a community that has such sky-high standards for bodies.

And I think that when it comes to setting a romance in the gym, yes, it can be such a positive place for a lot of people, but then for people who do struggle with, you know, body image and body dysmorphia and potential eating disorders, it can be a very triggering place as well.

And so, I definitely was mindful that that could be potentially triggering for readers. And that was part of the reason that I wanted to capture a lot of that commentary within the book, but then also warn people, because sometimes people pick up romantic comedy and they expect it to be completely light – you know, just laugh – and while the majority of the narrative is supposed to be light, there is that commentary. And so, I wanted to give people a chance to decide whether the book was going to be right for them at that time.



LW: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I wasn't expecting to see that note whenever I picked it up, but I was really glad that you included it. I thought that that made a really strong statement. So yeah, I liked that; that was a great touch. So, lets me segue into my favorite topic, talking about millennials and just how amazing we are.

AL: [laughs] Right?

LW: I know.

AL: We don't get enough credit.

LW: We don't. I think we get a lot of-- I don't know. There's just a smear campaign against us, and it's unfair

AL: Completely.

LW: I mean, that was actually one of the reasons that I decided to battle it out with Gabriela about who got to read your book was because it was like, millennials. And I was like, 'Yes, that's me, I want to read that.'

AL: [laughs] Perfect.

LW: Yeah. I think you're definitely going to capture the right audience with this. So, that sort of allows me to start talking about some of those millennial topics. I mean, millennials have changed the way that we approach socializing and dating; particularly, after the pandemic has led a lot of us to work from home or to go into freelancing, or people were already doing that before the pandemic.

So, how do you see those millennial characteristics, their attitudes changing the romance genre? Like, do you see any new trends emerging, things that we talk about or things that we cover in a romance novel?

Amy Lea: 100%. I think there's so many facets of that that we could talk about. I think in a lot of the contemporary romances and RomComs that I'm seeing come out now that are mostly written by millennial adults, you're seeing, I think a lot of a shift in how characters meet, for example.

So, with technology, you're seeing a lot of characters meeting via the internet via dating apps or online, which I always think is fun because while a lot of people kind of romanticize the past where you meet in person or you meet at the library or various types of traditional meet cues is not as much reality anymore.

And I think like most of the people that I know who have met others as an adult, not, you know, in college in person, but as an adult, they met online because, how else do you really meet?

I think when you're out in public, typically, like if I were at a library and somebody came up to me to talk to me, I would be probably weirded out.

LW: Yes.

AL: It's strange to say, but I think a lot of us millennials, like, we don't like that. And even phone calls and things like that, it's so different from, I think what we used to see.

[laughter]

LW: Yeah.



AL: And I also think, you know, a lot of the newer contemporary RomComs that deal with millennials, they're so much more diverse than what we saw before. I think that's something that our generation is really beginning to bring into the space is you're just seeing tons of different representation – whether that's race, disability. And it's really wonderful to see because again, that is just not something that existed 5, 10 years ago to the extent that we're seeing it now.

LW: Yeah. No, that makes a lot of sense because I was like, recently-- Actually, I guess, it just came out today, the day that we're recording it, wrote an article for the website about defining the romance genre and kind of the typical things that you see in it.

Like, you know, there's the focus on romance, there's the happily-ever-after or the happy-for-now, and then there's, you know, you've got a strong female character. And then, as I was writing it, I was like, 'Well, yeah, you frequently do, but it's so much more diverse than that now, you've got romance novels that don't even have a female character, like it's a male-male romance or non-binary.'

AL: Yeah.

LW: One of the things that's really nice about the romance genre is just how open has been to being more inclusive of different LGBTQ romances or different races, different, like you said, disabilities. I think that it's definitely it and Sci-Fi Fantasy are doing a lot to be more inclusive and broader representation.

AL: Exactly. I think that one of the best parts about that is, you know, I think a lot of times when people think about 'diverse reads' and a lot of times, they want to read books where these characters are defined by their struggle.

And I think that that's a really great thing about Romance and Sci-Fi and a lot of the more escape genres is that we centralize them as human beings; and they're experiencing joy and love and all of the things that other main characters have always experienced.

And you don't have to just only define them by the things that, you know, marginalized them. And I think it just-- It goes to show that everybody is deserving of the epic love story that they want.

LW: Mm-Hmm. Well, that leads me to my next question, and it's going to come in a roundabout way. First of all, have you been following my family? Because I feel like some of the family dynamics that you touched on were like, wow, mostly the grandmother with, you know, the deceased grandfather and the conflicted feelings about grandma's dating. Oh no, grandma's getting married.

AL: Right.

LW: I love how you did the family dynamics. What inspired that? I mean, it felt so true to life.

AL: Oh, well, thank you for saying that. It's funny because, so I have a very small family. I've no siblings, I'm an only child.

LW: Hey, me too.

AL: Oh, yay! It's always a struggle for me because I always like to have a sibling relationship or, you know, a large extended family aspect to both because I always enjoy reading that, but I don't have that in real life. And so, I'm nervous that writing that won't come across authentic because I haven't really experienced it firsthand. So, it's amazing for you to say that. Thank you. [laughs]



LW: Well, cool. [laughs]

AL: Yeah, I mean, real life didn't really inspire when I was thinking about Crystal and I was thinking about the journey that she'll have to take from the beginning point of the book to the end. I thought that it would be really important to showcase a support system around her. So, a support system – whether that's sibling parents or grandparents – who could be there for her.

And I think that's-- You know, it's one of the lessons that she does have to learn in the end, is relying on other people. And so, having a strong family support system to go along with that was really important for me. And part of the reason that I really wanted to highlight the grandparents, in particular, was in a lot of books, we often see characters brought together by friends, usually when weddings are involved.

So, oftentimes, we see, you know, somebody is a bridesmaid in a wedding party and stuff. And I love weddings in RomCom, so I knew that I wanted to have an aspect of that, but I kind of thought that turning it into a grandparent wedding would be an interesting twist because it's almost like, you know, that secondary romance within the book.

And I really love-- I don't know if this is bad to say, but I just love old people.

[laughter]

AL: I love seniors. I think that they're so great for comedic relief, and they're so wonderful to give the character of Stern talking to every so often. And so, I knew that I wanted to include them in the book, and I thought that, yeah, it would just be interesting to give her grandmother a second chance romance, then kind of have that little backstory in there and add some humor along with that.

So yeah, I guess it was just my attempt at putting a little bit of a spin on the side characters.

LW: Yeah. I like how you revealed more about the characters, kind of, in layers. And without going into any spoilers, like, you know, you've got Scott and some of the transformation that he's gone through, but like, Grandma Flo? I mean from Crystal's eyes, she's like strait-laced and then you cut to the bachelorette party scene.

I mean, I'm not going to give away what happens because it's-- I mean, you've got to read it for yourself to get the imagery, but then, at the bachelorette party and then in the same breath she says something to Crystal's sister about catching a man. And so, it's like, no.

AL: Yeah.

LW: And I just, I liked how you deep into the characters and layers like that.

AL: Oh, thank you. Yeah. I mean, it's definitely one of those things that, especially with grandparents, I think that a lot of us see our grandparents in a very particular way, whatever way that they present themselves. Usually, the stereotypical grandma would be conservative, religious – that kind of thing.

And so, that's the way that I wanted Crystal and her sister to see their grandmother. And then, as you kind of learn a little bit more about her, you see, you know, yes, she is those things, but she's got a little bit of a different side to her and a whole past that they don't know about.

LW: Yeah. Well, I'm looking forward to reading and continuing to figure out more about that past, because it's like, there's something there. I think you're pacing in how you reveal things and the way you reveal things, is it makes it fun.



AL: Right.

LW: One other thing I wanted to talk about with that is like, how do you keep things fresh? Because that's, like, you've got the romance and everybody knows they follow a particular, I don't want to say formula because that sounds negative, but I mean, you kind of know what's going to happen, but the trick for the romance author is to keep it fresh and make it interesting.

So, do you have any advice on how to do that?

AL: Yeah, I mean, that's an excellent point. I think that a lot of people with the Romance genre feel that it's very predictable and, in a sense, yes, because you know you're going to get the happily-ever-after. But I think it's kind of, I always compare it to mysteries or thrillers where, well, particularly mysteries, you know, the main character will always solve the mystery in the end.

So, it's kind of the same thing with the romance, but you just don't know how you're going to get there. And I think that's always the beauty of romance, is figuring out what loops does the character have to jump through in order to get their happy-ever-after.

And I think for me, one of the ways that I try to do that, and it's actually something that I'm still learning because I don't know that I used that for the first two crappy books that I wrote, but it's a specific piece of advice that I was told where you always have to stay very connected with your main character.

And by that, I mean, you know, with figuring out what their arc or the journey is going to be. Because by doing that and always keeping that in mind, your reader will hopefully be more connected to that character; and therefore, the tension will continue to build.

And so, I always start off by asking myself when I'm developing the character, what does this character want? What do they think they want at the beginning of the story? What is their goal, and how does that evolve through the book? And even within each scene and within each chapter, I'm checking in to see, what do they want?

And I think that by doing that, you keep the emotional thread of the romance and the book alive because as the author, you are going to add tension by continuously challenging what they want. And I think you're either going to give them what they want and see what they do with it, or you'll place roadblocks in front of them, which is my favorite part, or you'll make them realize that they want something else.

And so, by challenging them consistently throughout and challenging their goal, it keeps the tension alive, I think. So, for example, in Set On You, in the beginning of the book, Crystal is very independent, very set in her ways – whether that would be the way that she runs her social media platform or her personal life.

You know, she's fresh out of relationship. She doesn't care to be romantically involved with anybody; and Scott, the love interest, comes along and challenges not only what she sees from herself romantically, but also the way that she views life, in general, when it comes to how she meets herself, what she deserves, and the way she handles her relationships with other people.

And so, I think that that's the main way that I keep tension, is ensuring that whether it's the internal or external, that the main character is consistently challenged throughout.

LW: That's a good point. Yeah. Like, I'm sure there's got to be a lot of fun. Like, 'Okay, how can I make my character's life suck just a little bit more?'



[laughter]

AL: It's, yes, and it sounds diabolical, but that's the best part because you don't want them to get what they want right away because then there's no story, right?

LW: Yeah.

AL: You have to, you know, give them temptations and snatch them back; and finally, give it to them at the end. But it's the journey and the roller-coaster of how they get there, and how they evolve their thinking and even getting something completely different than what they thought that they wanted.

So, that's always fun; and it always, I think, keeps the reader guessing. And I think another way that I tend to try to build a tension is by always, and even just with the structure and the writing style, is that I always try to write kind of like, it was once described to me like a see-saw.

So, if your character is super happy in the beginning of the chapter, it helps to try to lower their mood or present another challenge to them by the end of the chapter. And also, by ending that chapter kind of on a little bit of a cliff-hanger so that the reader will naturally want to keep going.

And so, you always see that see-saw of emotions kind of going up and down throughout the book; and you know, not so much that the reader gets whiplash, but I think it definitely helps with that journey.

LW: Well, I'd love to dive a little bit more into process, your process, in particular. You said your first two novels you wrote just completely pantsed it, but this one you had started out with like your gym setting, and then Crystal kind of came to you.

And so, I mean, how did that evolve? Like, did you just kind of free-write some scenes or like a basic arc, and then went back through and like, 'Okay, how can I make this more difficult? How can I create this see-saw effect?'

AL: Yeah, I think that when it comes to my process, honestly, I wish I could say that I had a very set process, but so far with all the books that I've written since, they've all been very different in terms of what works. And that's not great for a lot of writers--

[laughter]

AL: -because they like to have a process, but unfortunately, mine has not been straightforward. But I think that when it came to the first two books that I wrote, you know, I just pantsed them; and I think that the beauty in that is you're always surprising yourself whenever you're writing.

You know, it allows for a lot of free flow and creativity as you go. And when I set out to write Set On You, I had worked with an editor and I learned a lot more about, you know, the genre convention, beats, pacing, tension, you know, how to develop a fulsome character arc.

And so, I didn't plot the entire thing, but I used the least outline because I had-- I mean, I knew the setting, I knew the main characters, and I knew that there were certain scenes that I wanted. And so, I think some of the first scenes that came to me were some of those gym scenes where, you know, they're battling it out; and that was kind of it.

I didn't really know for sure what the conflict would be. And yeah, I guess that that would be a bit of a mix of plotting and pantsing. And I think that looking back, it definitely would've helped me to know what exactly I wanted for my character at the end of the book because a lot of Crystal's journey kind of came to me after a couple of edits and a couple of revisions.



So, originally, the book ended a lot-- Well, her journey was a lot different than what it is now. And I think that, you know, in subsequent books, even when I try to religiously outline--

And my third book that I wrote, which is the third in the series, I had the full outline, everything that was going to happen – scene to scene. Like it was completely opposite, but the characters always surprised me, anyways; and they tend to do things that I didn't plan for them to do in the initial outline.

And I think that that's also where characters get glory because you're a little bit more surprised as you write and as you're developing their characters, sometimes they just take on personalities or they want to do things that are totally different than what you set out for them to do. So, I think that even when you do have a very specific outline, sometimes it can just go totally off the rails depending on how you're developing your characters.

So, I think, you know, for example, with *Set On You*, Crystal was always kind of the same person, but Scott, I envisioned to be a lot more Alpha; and I thought that Crystal was going to be the one to initiate most of the banter within the gym.

But as I wrote, I kind of realized that Scott wanted to be a slightly softer character who wore his heart on his sleeve in order to balance Crystal's tough exterior. And so, I think that a lot of the character relationships and things that could change, really just such a web; that, you know, if you change one thing, then one character may want to be a different way.

Yeah, that's my messy answer to your question, that my process completely changes every time.

LW: Yeah. I love that. Like, there have been a couple of projects that I have outlined out or tried to outline out in a couple of different methods of doing outlines. And then it was like, by the time I finished the outline, I don't know if it was that I was like bored with the book, I was just like, 'Well, I don't really feel like writing it now.'

AL: Yeah.

LW: Or I just felt so like trapped and confined by the outline.

AL: Yes.

LW: So, I think that's really good advice.

AL: I totally get that though, because I think that's kind of what happened to me. Whenever I write a very fulsome outline it, I get a little bit bored because then I'm like, 'Oh, well, I know it's going to happen, I don't feel the need to write this now, now,' because then it becomes more of a task of just writing the words, getting the words down as opposed to discovering the story.

But you know, that being said, I know that outlines really, really work for a lot of people. So, I think it's really a personal thing too. And kind of, like I said, it also just depends on the book. I think some books and some genres really require more of an outline, and some don't. So, very personal thing.

LW: Yeah. No, I mean, because like you've got Stephen King who's like, 'If I know what the end of the book is, by the time I sit down and write, what's the point of writing it?' So, for him, I guess, the journey is the fun part, which I get that.

Amy Lea: Yeah, that's very interesting.



LW: So, one other thing I wanted to ask about with process is, you know, in this book Crystal is a fitstagrammer and you periodically weave in posts that she does.

And I guess this is kind of a twofold question, but how did you decide when you wanted to develop or put in one of those posts - Instagram posts – but then also, how did you develop that? I mean, it's kind of like a dual character type thing because you had Crystal as she was in her real life, and then you also had her Instagram persona.

AL: Right.

LW: So, I guess, answer both questions. [laughs]

AL: Yeah.

LW: But I mean, I don't know, it's just interesting the way that played out.

AL: Yes. I think that in terms of deciding when to include those posts, a lot of it was, I think that the original reason that I wanted to include them was more so that people could fully understand and see the influencer side of her. But then also, I guess to showcase some of the things that she was thinking, which were a little bit more meta, that would, I guess, come across in her regular train of thought, her regular life.

So, some of the things about, you know, gym etiquette or the body positivity, body acceptance movement – things that were important to her, but were very platform-specific and professional; I wanted to include those. And usually, I decided that I would include them when I felt like it was a kind of a theme that mirrored what was going on currently.

So, that was sort of the reason for leaving those in when I did. And in terms of the second part of the question, I think voice is always interesting to discuss because I think a lot of writers take it very different ways. You know, I think a lot of people feel that voice is something that's just natural and it's part of the writer; it's the context of who they are, their identity. And I think that that's totally true.

I also think though, that it's something that we can work on as a craft for very specific reason. So, in terms of Crystal, her Instagram persona and her personal trainer persona is her, but it's also, it's an extension of her. It's not 100% her.

So, I think for her in particular, she does pride herself in being authentic online. You know, she doesn't push things on her followers that she doesn't believe in. And as her regular narrative and her personal trainer narrative, I envision her as being very supportive kind of person. She wants the best for everybody, which is why she's dedicated her life to helping people in this way.

And that's the persona that I really wanted to capture for her, especially for her influencer side. And I studied a lot of fitness influencers online – whether that was through their videos or their written post or blogs – to kind of see the types of language that they use and the kind of general personality that they use.

And what I noticed was that a lot of them use very positive language all the time; and that was something that she does in her blog posts, for the most part. But that it's also something that's a little bit contrary to her real personality in her regular narrative.

Because when you get inside of her head, you know, she's not 100% confident all the time, even though she thinks she has to be, because that's what her persona is and that's what she believes her



followers want and need. But that's something that she does struggle with towards the end is, how much of what I'm really feeling should I share?

Because authenticity, yes, she wants to be real, but she also doesn't want to negatively impact any of your followers if they're feeling different than what she's feeling. And so, that was something that I really wanted to play with.

LW: Yeah. And I thought you did that in a fantastic way. I mean, this isn't so much to do with like the body image, but just the juxtaposition of the online versus the real. Like, you know, she's got all these sponsorships; and so, she's supposed to always wear Lulu leggings to the gym and then, you know, there's that comment later about her 'staying at home Lulus' versus her 'going out Lulus', and that just cracked me up.

AL: [laughs] I 100% have 'staying in Lulus' and 'going out Lulus'.

[laughter]

AL: That is itself in circle of.

[laughter]

LW: That's something that you do a fantastic job of throughout the book, is just like weaving in all of these like little millennial references just super seamlessly. I felt like a, I had a bingo card and I could just check off like, 'Oh, there's a friend's reference – oh, she's talking about house plants - Oh, IKEA, Oh, Sex and the City reference.' And I loved that.

AL: Totally.

LW: I mean, it came across like really naturally, like it wasn't one of those, I mean, obviously, this isn't a movie, but you like the Back to the Future 2, where they go into the future and they're at the 80s café, and it's like beating you over the head with its 80s-ness. It seemed very natural the way you wove in all these millennial references.

AL: Oh, great. Thank you. Yeah, I think that, you know, pop culture references is very divisive subject because I think that a lot of people, in general, with pop culture references, they think that it cheapens a book or that it may date a book; and that definitely can be true depending on the genre or the sub-genre.

But I think that for my books, in particular, first, wasn't my goal to write something that was timeless; you know, people were going to read this in a hundred years from now. You know, that was never my goal. And also, a book is about influencers.

I think influencers are our pop culture. That's just what they do. That's what they are. They promote things that are popular in pop culture and they make things popular in this society. Sorry, that was a tongue-twister. [laughs]

But I think that it would be disingenuous not to include those types of references in a book about a social media influencer, because by default, you're using the technology of the day, you're promoting things that are important at that time. So, that was definitely a very natural decision to include those references.

And I think that in terms of age and stuff like that, you know, I was pretty cognizant of what kind of references would be top of mind for her. And I tried to make it as current; but also, hopefully, it won't seem too dated by the time, you know, a couple years roll around and when the new social media app comes out.

But yeah, it's something that I think a lot of writers struggle with when it comes to pop culture references because we want to include them because that's, you know, what makes somebody who they are a lot of times, especially millennials, but at the same time, still trying to make it stand along without them.

LW: I think that's a really good point. Obviously, as a millennial, I see it being true for millennials, but like, I can't think of a past generation that is more wrapped in nostalgia and celebration of itself than millennials. And I just, I love that. I know we get a lot of crap for it, but I love that. I think that's a lot of fun.

AL: Absolutely. I always wonder though, why that is. It's very interesting.

LW: Yeah, that's a really good point. I mean, I'm like kind of dabbling with a collection of essays on different millennial things, like different things that we've ruined – and kind of how that's sometimes by choice, sometimes by default. But yeah, like nostalgia is definitely something I'm going to have to do a lot of research on, just that pop culture nostalgia.

AL: Yeah, absolutely. I'm not sure if you've seen the show *Euphoria*, but one thing that I find really interesting about that show is they dress all of the teams very 90s; all of their clothes and their makeup – they literally just look like they're from the 90s. And I don't know if that's because 90s fashion is so in right now, but it is a very interesting stylistic choice and something that, kind of, pulls an adult watcher of the show in because it's familiar. Yeah, very interesting nostalgia.

LW: Oh, I have to check out that show, thanks for the rec. So, in your previous answer, you were talking about influencers. Now, you got your start in Bookstagram, right?

AL: Yes.

LW: I mean, a couple of questions on that. Like, what advice do you have for people who are interested in starting a Bookstagram?

AL: Oh yeah. Bookstagram is honestly such a fun community. I kind of found it by accident, I guess you could say. When I got back into reading, I had read a book that I loved and I had, you know, the biggest book hang-over, but nobody in my real life had read the book and read romance, in general.

So, I just didn't have anybody to talk about it with, which really drove me nuts because, you know, when you read such a good book, you just want to talk about it with people.

LW: Yes.

AL: And so, by just random happenstance, I searched the hashtag for the book's title in Instagram, I didn't even know Bookstagram existed. And then, I just came across all of these accounts that were dedicated to just books, which, like I said, I didn't know that that was a thing, and I creeped it from afar for like a little while.

[laughter]

AL: And I used, I think my personal account to respond to a post about the book saying, "Oh my gosh, I loved this book so much, these are the things I liked about it," and the person who responded. And I just thought it was so cool.

And so, eventually – I think after like a couple weeks of creeping – I finally decided to make my own account because I was like, 'I need to be part of this.' Because before that, finding book recommendations or finding the next book to read was actually super difficult for me because the only way that I did it was going into a Chapters Indigo – which is I guess the Barnes & Noble



equivalent in Canada – by going into a store like that and looking at what they have on the shelf, which, you know, was fine, but it's time-consuming because then you got to read them all and you're not sure which ones that you're going to like.

And at least with Bookstagram, you need a community of people who love the same books as you and who are giving recommendations. And so, after joining Bookstagram, I had an endless list of books that I wanted to read, which was so different from before when I was struggling to find a book.

And so, yeah, I guess, my biggest advice for people who wanted to start a Bookstagram account is you have to read what you like and find a community or a group of people – whether that's 1,2, or 10 people – who love the same books that you love.

And the best part of the community is finding that group of people and making friends and making genuine connections, as opposed to just followers and getting free books, although those are perks. But the biggest, I think, takeaway for me after having Bookstagram for, I think, three to four years now, is really the connections that I've made because those people have stuck with me through my transition to be an author. So, it's been a really special thing.

LW: Yeah. Before this interview, I followed you and you followed me back, and I was like, 'Oh, that's cool, I'm getting ready to interview her.'

[laughter]

LW: So yeah, I mean, it's totally-- It's all about connections, and that makes it a lot of fun. But unfortunately, we are running out of time because we both need to get onto the next thing. So, there are interviews with the same couple of questions, what is next for you?

AL: Yes, so, like I said in the beginning, Set On You is the first in a three-book series about different influencers. So, the things that I'm working on now are the second and the third book to that series. So, they are going to feature two side characters from Set On You; so it's going to be Crystal's sister Tara--

LW: Yes.

AL: -who is a book influencer. Yeah. She's a Bookstagrammer or booktalker. And the third book is going to be Mel, her friend who she meets at the gym; and Mel is a fashion beauty influencer.

LW: Ooh. I'm excited about that.

[laughter]

AL: Thank you. Yeah.

LW: I was wondering, as I was reading like Tara is a Bookstagrammer, I was wondering if she was kind of like based a little bit more on you or a little bit more in common with her than you did with Crystal?

AL: Oh, 100%, because I'm not a gymer, at all.

[laughter]

AL: It's funny because I just finished developmental edits on Book 2 with my editor, which is Tara's book; and I think that book is my favorite book that I've written. And I don't know if it's because I connect with her on that level, but it's by far my favorite.



LW: Ooh. Well, I will definitely be sure to keep an eye out for those books because this is just such a fun world instead of characters that you've created. So, thank you.

AL: Thank you. I appreciate it.

LW: And then, we always end every episode with the same question, what is your number one tip for writers?

AL: Ooh, that is a tough one.

LW: I know, right?

[laughter]

AL: And there's so much advice floating around; and I think that it's really important to be aware of all of these tidbits of advice, whether that's specifically about craft, hitting word counts, writing schedules.

You know, I think that you have to take what works for you because not all advice is for everybody or for every story and everybody's lifestyle, whether they work during the day is just so different. And so, you have to just take what works for you.

But I think my biggest advice is to just get the words on the page; they don't have to be good, they don't have to sound good. It doesn't have to make any sense, but you just have to get words on page because that's the only way you're going to be able to make it better and edit it.

If it doesn't exist on the page, you don't have anything aside from what's in your head. And so, I'm a huge proponent of fast draft or zero draft, which is just your stream of consciousness – just the very, very, very rough draft. Then you have something to work with; whether it's good or bad, it's something.

LW: Yeah. Like you can't edit a blank page, but you can edit bad writing.

AL: 100%. That's exactly what I was trying to say but, yes.

[laughter]

AL: I couldn't think of the saying, but yes,

LW: [laughs] Mind, Mel, that's what we've got going on here.

[laughs]

AL: Exactly.

LW: Well, thank you so much for being on the show today, Amy. It was an absolute pleasure getting to talk to you, and I can't wait for the rest of your books to come out and to just catch you on Bookstagram.

AL: Oh, thank you so much. I appreciate it. I had so much fun.

LW: Oh, me too. All right, word nerds. Thanks for listening today. I'll catch you on the flip side.

