Episode 98: Interview with Renée Watson

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Jenn Baker: Hello, and welcome to the latest episode of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. This is Jenn, and for new and returning listeners, you may know: you can find the podcast on Tumblr at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com or on Twitter at @MinoritiesinPub. The podcast can be heard wherever you listen to podcasts, including Apple podcasts, iHeartRadio, Google Play, Spotify and TuneIn.

I am very happy to welcome back Renée Watson, who has had a bit of a wild ride since we first talked on the podcast. And that was with Zetta Elliot several years ago—it might have been 2015 or early 2016. But it feels like eons ago, and so much has happened for Renée. She has a new book coming out by the time this episode airs, called *Ways to Make Sunshine*. And I can't wait to talk to her about this because this is kind of a new venture for you genre wise.

Renée Watson: I can't believe it's been so long, and so much has happened in these last few years. It's been a wild ride. And it's been so fun to have you alongside, too, to share all these moments with me.

Jenn: Oh, shucks. (laughter) Renée keeps me humble. Grounded and humble! (More laughter) That's what I'm trying to be!

So I'm really excited to talk about *Ways to Make Sunshine*, which stars Ryan Hart, and it's marketed as middle grade. But there's a kind of younger demographic, I'm kind of speaking in publishing terms for those who are listening. And I had thought about it as early readership kind of that, quote-unquote, "sweet spot" between that, you know that spot where it's not picture books, it's not quite middle grade? So we're kind of in that in-between space when people are reading, but they might not be reading like full-on novels. Yeah, you know what I mean, like the structure of the novel is a little bit different.

Renée: Right, right, a picture here and there. Yeah. I mean, I wanted to write for younger readers. I have a lot of young readers in my life. And I have teachers who often ask, "Oh, what are you gonna write for my fourth graders or my fifth graders?" And so I have been thinking about it for a while. And I have been wanting to write like, my kind of "Ode to Ramona." As a girl who grew up in Portland and who read the *Ramona* series and loved the fact that I recognize those streets, and I could go to the same library that she was going to in the book and things like that. So I wanted to do something in a younger range, but have her be a brown girl that's playing in Portland parks and running around with her friends, and getting into all kinds of shenanigans. So yeah, it's a different voice for me, but I had a lot of fun writing it. And it came at a time where I also needed a break from some of the more serious stuff and just let the character be in the middle of black joy, I feel, and so it was good for *me* also to write it. I needed some joy and some fun. So Ryan brought that to me.

Jenn: So when you're writing, I mean, this might be an unfair question, because I don't necessarily feel everything is so much planned in advance.

Renée: Right…

Jenn: Your art is so organic, is the word that is very, very often used. But it does feel as though, like you said, you needed some joy. So, there was kind of this purposeful move of: this is what this book is going to be, or this series, because it's a series.

Renée: Mm hmm.

Jenn: So when going about that, especially for writing for young people in particular, is there kind of just like a shift, a mental shift or a kind of focus, or a way you check yourself when you're writing also? Just like, "Oh, no, no one can die…"

Renée: Right!

Jenn: Can't have anyone saying the N word here. We gotta make it palatable.

Renée: I definitely had to pull myself back from going down other paths that I would have maybe more naturally leaned into as a writer, just because I have been writing so much about race and class, gender, body size, all of that. But she's a black girl. So at the same time, we are going to have her thinking about what it means to be a brown girl living in Oregon. Because in the fourth grade, I was very aware of that, you know what I mean?

So it is still about her being a black girl. And it still covers those kinds of issues, too. It's just not the center of the story in this, in the way that maybe in *Piecing Me Together*, or in *Watch Us Rise*, where you're very much: "This story is about this girl's blackness." Or for Jasmine in *Watch Us Rise* about her body and about what she has to say about being a big black girl.

You know, this character is not quite like "saying it loud, I'm black, and I'm proud," or anything like that, but it's certainly a part of the book because it's a part of her identity and her culture. Does that make sense?

Jenn: Absolutely.

Renée: I think it's important that we have both, right? And I'm trying to put out a body of work that covers the nuances and the different types of families, different types of black girls that there are, and all the people that I have seen in my neighborhoods and that I grew up loving and who loved me, and the young people that I meet, we are a vast culture.

And so yeah, for Ryan, she is not so much protesting or speaking back to power and all those things. She's in the fourth grade. But she certainly is proud of her kinky hair, and she is definitely figuring out, you know, what it's like to be in a swimming pool with her best friends. And some of the girls are biracial and have a different texture. Some of the girls are white, and they have a different texture of hair. And then she's African American. So she notices differences and is very aware of that. And I think that I had to include that because that's reality, and I always say, "I write realistic fiction," so I can't shy away from what's real. And what's real is also joy and that little girls in black neighborhoods have fun and play and are silly and like to cook and do the things that their mothers do. And so I wanted to show that part of a black family, too.

Jenn: I also want to shout out the beautiful, beautiful illustrations in this book by Nina Mata.

Renée: Love her work. I'm so, yeah, I love her work. I love the cover and the different—

Jenn: So adorable!

Renée: —images in the book. And I love that we have a scene in here that's illustrated where Ryan is getting her hair pressed. That's like one of my favorites.

Jenn: That's my favorite, too! I had talked with you about it. Also she's wearing a bonnet!

Renée: Yes, girl! We can't go to bed without putting something on our head! Yes!

Jenn: Add to my (???)

(laughter)

Renée: Yeah, all of that was important to me. I think those images matter. And I wanted little girls who can really relate to Ryan in the physical sense, I wanted them to see their family in this book and see all those little things that maybe other little girls don't have to tie their hair up at night, but we know we do. Oh yeah, that needed to be in the book, and I love that she included that.

Jenn: And if you don't tie up your hair, expect—

Renée: Oh right, there will be consequences.

(laughing)

Jenn: Very much consequences!... Truth and consequences!

Well, I can I just say also touching on that, and joy and all this. I feel like the cover, which people will see. You can see it right now if you preorder. And on April 28, when

this book comes out, this is the happiest black girl I've seen on a children's lit book in a very long time that isn't a picture book. You know what I mean, like now that I work primarily in children's books, I'm seeing these covers all the time. And mind you I think it is something that is classified more for YA, the seriousness, if a black girl is on it, she's like serious. And that's by design. It's usually, unless it's a hardcore romance, and that's usually stock photography. They're fighting in a kingdom, they're fighting racism, they're fighting duh duh dahhh.

Ah, but Ryan is just so cute. She's just so adorable. She's just so confident on that cover. And it translates to the imagery in the book too, which I'm very happy exists by Nina, of, you know, the family time. And you know, but there's also her moments of being terrified on Easter. And all those…not to say she's terrified of Easter. Something happened.

Renée: Yes. Very nervous of making her Easter speech.

Jenn: Yeah, yes. So it's just kind of a refreshing read, if we could call it a palate cleanser. After reading about racism and gaslighting, it's like: "Let me pick up 'Ways to Make Sunshine.'"

Renée: Well, yeah, I mean—literally, I know Ryan Hart, meaning that name is the name of my goddaughter. And Ryan, the real Ryan, these scenarios are not necessarily hers, right? It's fiction. But the negative truth is that when Ryan was in the fourth grade, she was standing on the little stool to helping her mom cook in the kitchen and trying to make up her own concoctions and always asking us to taste something. And she loved to play outside. And she's learning the piano and doing all these things that little girls just get to do, right? They deserve to have stories where they get to just play. And where they get to get into shenanigans and get in trouble and be feisty and bold and brave, and sometimes shy and sometimes nervous, and sometimes jealous. You know, she's a whole range of emotions, because in the fourth grade, you are a whole range of emotions! And I wanted a book to exist for girls like the real Ryan in my life, because I know so many of them.

So yes, I do love that we got to capture that. Hopefully, I did a good job of capturing them in the words, but yeah, the images are important to me too, because I do think there's something powerful about actually seeing what that looks like. And getting to see the images throughout the book just added more texture to the story and kind of drove those points home, I think.

[10:10]

Jenn: And I love how it begins. She's in the classroom, and there's a sub. I'll presume the sub is white by actions alone, I'm just like, "Mmm. 'Kay." You know, how Ryan is outspoken. And she says, "My name means this, and you don't call Devonte 'Devonte,' you call him 'D.'"

You know, and the sub is like, “Settle down, settle down.” So already, someone's trying to silence her. She’s like, “What’s this about?” And she doesn’t become silent. She’s just like, “What? I'm questioning.” In her little fourth grade way of doing that, right.

Renée: She is definitely trying to live up to her name. Ryan means “king,” and her parents tell her: “You are a leader, you know, we want you to live up to your name.” And so she has that in the back of her mind at all times, that I need to live up to this expectation, that I come from royalty, that my ancestors are great. And I have a lot to be proud of. And I have a lot of people to make proud—including herself, you know.

So yeah, she, she gets teased for having a boy's name. And she's like, “No, I have *my* name.” And she is told by this, you know, some of the boys think they can run faster than her, and that they're better than her. And she's not afraid to stand up to those challenges and say, “Okay, well, then I'll race you then. Let's see.” And, you know, sometimes she wins, and sometimes she loses, but I wanted her to be the type of character that's going to try. And that's gonna keep pushing herself to be better, even when it's in those little things that maybe don't seem like they matter as much like a race. Yeah, she's that kid who's always going to raise her hand and put herself out there, even when it makes her nervous.

Jenn: So I’m think and more about Ryan and your catalog—because you have a catalog! There's the Renée Watson, like, full on catalog! You’re seven, eight books in?

Renée: Um, nine.

Jenn: Nine!?

Renée: Yeah. And the second book, which I'm working on right now already, the follow up to *Ways to Make Sunshine*. So I’m almost at that 10-book mark! And it's been 10 years since my—

Jenn: Whaaat!

Renée: —my picture book *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen* was published in 2010. So 2020 marks my tenth year of having, like, published work in the world. Which of course, I mean, I've been writing my whole life, but as far as my published work, it's been a decade. So I've learned a lot, and I'm trying to push myself to keep doing new things and challenge myself in new ways.

Jenn: That's not an easy feat, especially publishing these books. You know what I mean? Because I presume, even though you've had 9, 10, and so forth, books published, that doesn't mean you've written 9, 10.

Renée: Right, yeah.

Jenn: There may be more that we *may* see, that we may never see.

Renée: No, for sure I have more coming. I just recently signed on with Bloomsbury for three more books. So there's definitely more coming soon. And I definitely want to do more picture books. And I've been in a few anthologies, along with the novels. So yeah, I'm a writer. That's what I do. And so, I've been producing a lot, because I have a lot to say right now. I don't know that I'll always write at this pace. But right now, while the ideas are here, I want to get them out.

Jenn: I'm curious about your perspective, because Jacqueline Woodson has said she doesn't believe in writer's block. She believes in being stuck.

Renée: Right.

Jenn: She doesn't believe in writer's block, very specifically. And I was talking to someone else the other day about imposter syndrome. And I was thinking, "Hmm, do I believe in that?" I mean, I'm not gonna reject how someone feels, but I was like "Do I believe in this? Do I believe in this as a proponent to stifle your writing because you feel like an imposter? You feel like you're not a writer?"

And to me that really stems from fear, which is, I think, especially what Jacqueline's talking about in terms of writer's block: fear. Fear of progression. Considering you're nine-going-on-ten books in, I wondered about your process, and where you come from in terms of this. Especially when you look back at the beginning, when you look back at *What Mama Left Me* and, you know, *When Hurricanes Happen*, is that the accurate title?

Renée: *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*.

Jenn: *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*. And also the songbird book you did with Christian [Robinson]. And all those books.

Renée: Yeah, so, I feel like in the beginning. Well, I'll say this about writer's block. I think some stories, you're just not ready to tell yet. So the block is coming because that story might need to sit a little longer. You need to live a little more life, or do some more research. Or whatever.

Jenn: [laughs]

Renée: No, I'm serious!

Jenn: You're like, "You need to live!"

Renée: I could not have written—you're laughing, but I'm so serious. I, the younger Renee was, I started a draft of *This Side of Home*, that I didn't know was gonna become a novel one day, but I literally started that as a short story in high school and in my early 20s. Because Portland was changing. I didn't even know the word "gentrification," but I could feel it. I knew what I felt being a junior in my high school and watching my neighborhood literally, like just change drastically before my eyes.

So it was a short story, and part of it was published, I think, in our literary magazine at the school, right? And I just kind of kept this with me, you know, all these years. And then I think it was maybe my early 20s, I picked it back up and try to extend it, and I was writing it as a play, and it kind of took on a different shape. And then it wasn't until my late 20s, early 30s that I actually wrote it as a YA novel and got it published. But by then I had lived through gentrification in Portland, I had moved to Brooklyn and seen it happen there. And at the time was living in Harlem and was watching it happen. And so I had a lot more just life experience and things to say about it that taught young people you know… so there's some living that you might need to do before you can write about certain things.

And then some things just need to marinate. I have story ideas, and I'm like, "Hmm, I feel like that's a good idea. But I don't know I just need to think about the characters a little bit more, the plot a little bit more." So that's, writer's block to me is that. So I go on to the next thing that has energy or that feels ready, and then it flows a lot better because I'm ready to write it. So that's why I can kind of juggle a lot of projects at once. Because some are simmering, and some are marinating, and some are not even starting yet, and some are fully ready for me to write.

The imposter syndrome, I mean, I definitely… I don't know that I'd call it that. But every book, I'm like, "Oh, my goodness, I can't do this." I mean, it's a blank page every time. And now that there is a readership and there is an expectation, and I have had reviews, and I have people who are waiting for the next book, there's a pressure and I want to make sure I'm putting out work that people want to read and are getting something out of. So I definitely feel at the beginning of everything, I write, a little anxiety over like, "Oh my goodness, what am I doing? Where is this story going? Is this a story worth telling?" Like, yeah, absolutely, everything I write every poem, every short story, essay, anything I write, there's a little bit of, "I don't know what to say, or should I be saying this or is this worth saying?," you know? But I think that's just a part of making. I think it's okay to be in that murky ground of like, "I don't know what this is yet," and then you figure it out and you push through. I mean, that is what making and writing, whether it's visual art or the written word, I think that's just a part of it.

Jenn: Well, speaking to the pressure, of what pressure was there prior to everything that has happened since you've been on, and to this day—especially when you look at your covers now. And it's kind of this reminder, every single time it says it right there. "New York Times bestseller." "Newberry Honor." Every single time!

Renée: [laughs] Wait, so you're asking what kind of pressure is there now? Since *Piecing Me Together*?

Jenn: Well, if there is. You said there is, but it feels as though maybe it's different. At the same time you're writing for a very, I feel, precious segment of the world. I mean, it's the adults who review it. It's the adults who buy it. It's the adults who get the most verbiage, they get the platforms to talk about children's books, ironically or not. But it's really the

young people that you're trying to reach. And that's a very, to me, like I said, precious segment, because like you said, they're very honest.

Renée: For sure.

Jenn: They're very honest. They're obviously not stupid.

Renée: Oh yeah, they know. They know.

Jenn: They know what they want. And they know what they like, and they ask questions, and they can, you know. I've read books talking down to children, absolutely. Because people think it's easy. So when you think of the end reader, is there a kind of pressure there? Get rid of the awards. If you get rid of the reviews and the stars and all that stuff. With just like the young people?

Renée: I don't think of it as pressure, but I honestly, I mean, it is… I feel the weight of the responsibility to honor them, and to get their stories right, and to make them feel seen and validated.

[20:04]

Renée: To not talk down to them because they're young, to not write with the white gaze in mind when I'm writing about black girlhood. So not over-explaining things about their hair, or cultural foods, or things like that. I'm definitely thinking about that as I go to the page, and wanting to—

Jenn: Looking for their bonnets!

Renée: Yes!

Jenn: And tie their hair up properly.

Renée: [laughs] But I'm serious, those little details matter, right, I want little and young adult black girls to look at my books and see themselves in them in very real ways. And so if there's a pressure, that's the pressure for me.

And I do realize that not every book will resonate the same reader. There will be a girl who may love two of my books and not the rest, or one may love all of them. You know, I hope that the readers can grow with me over time. I'm at a point now where I do have, you know, a picture book, middle grade, so I could actually grow up with a family or the same girl. But I also know that one book might be *the* book for that young person. And that's fine, too. You know what I mean?

But I do hope that the girl who gets the book in her hand, that she feels seen and validated. So, I have that pressure in my mind always of like, pushing out the noise of what I, whoever is telling me like, "This is what's selling now," or, you know, "You

should do it this way." Like, I have to silence all the voices and just write the stories that I want to tell, and that is hard to do.

Jenn: Especially in the market, right?

Renée: Right, yeah.

Jenn: Because it's capitalism.

Renée: Exactly. And it's challenging sometimes to keep my audience in mind, like I am writing for everyone because I believe stories are for everybody. And everyone can get something out of a story, regardless of who the character is and who the reader is. So when I say I'm writing for black girls, what I mean is I'm writing for them to see themselves and for other people to see them. And so that means that I can't placate to whiteness and center whiteness.

And that's sometimes it's hard, not hard to do as a writer but hard to do in this industry and in this field. Because so many times you get, it's hard, I think, for white folks to read and not want everything explained to them so crystal clear that they don't have to do any thinking, or any like, "Oh, I don't really know what this means. But the context of this paragraph, I'm sure I can figure it out," you know, kind of thing? So, I'm constantly having to make sure I'm not over-explaining what the obvious is to the young people that I'm writing for.

Jenn: I think a lot about that, in terms of my enjoyment of your work. And I'm, you know, I'm a big fan of you as a human being but I'm also a big fan of your catalog. I keep saying that word too.

Renée: Thank you. [laughs] I've never even heard that word in relationship to my work. So thanks!

Jenn: The Renée Watson catalog? Something for everybody! One of my favorite books is *Betty Before X*.

Renée: Oh, thank you!

Jenn: Yeah, it's one of my faves. I have a lot of feelings about that book that we can talk about offline. [laughs]

Renée: I didn't know this! This is news to me!

Jenn: But yeah, it captured something, and its middle grade, too.

Renée: Mmhmm.

Jenn: And I think it's very, very difficult to accomplish certain things. Again, it's not talking down to, condescending to, writing down to, it's none of that. But I remember talking to David Barclay Moore, when he did his middle grade, that was also when he got the John Steptoe when that came out. And he had primarily written plays and screenplays and, you know, *literary dramas* and all that stuff, you know, as very queer. He was talking about the white gaze. He was talking about the queer gaze. Now, it was very, very centered in queerness, and all this stuff.

And I talked to him I said, "Okay, so you never wrote for the young adult audience before?" And he said, "No." And I said, "Okay, and your first book ever in that realm is middle grade?" I said, "That's completely different in terms of your approach, especially from screenplays and all that stuff." You know, I asked him how he did it. And one of the ways he said was looking at the structure of sentences. I feel like I do this a lot, is that you just stuff so much into a sentence.

Renée: Mmhmm.

Jenn: Now you're thinking more of, "Oh, well, kid's not gonna have that kind of patience, if your sentences a paragraph technically." But I often talk about like the concreteness of agency in what kids are seeing—but also being participants of what's around them. And that's to me what makes the difference of "Children's Lit." There's so many things that could still be Children's Lit. And again, this is an industry thing that's created this categorization.

I feel like that's so important in these stories of not talking down to them, but letting them experience something, and letting them also particularly be part of also an adult journey, while not necessarily giving them a lot of the responsibility—unless that's really about the book, what the book is about.

Renée: Yeah, with *Betty before X* it was, I mean, I had to write it that way, because that's who Betty [Shabazz] was. So it was amazing to actually learn about, I knew about her as an adult and as Malcolm X's wife. But I did not know about her childhood. So working with Ilyasah, her daughter, on the book, I learned so much about, "Yeah, you know we say this, but like, who you're grooming these young people to be, that's who they become." And so as a child, she was volunteering and she was very mindful of her sisters. And she was learning about the struggle and figuring out who she wanted to be in this world. And so it makes so much sense that she grew up to be the woman that she became; those things don't happen by accident.

So, when I'm writing for young people, I am definitely thinking about: these are going to be our leaders—and in actually a really short amount of time. And so how can I contribute to their growth? How can I contribute to them looking outside of themselves, looking into themselves? Yeah, what do I want to, how am I going to help shape our future? And so I don't shy away from issues. I don't, even if they're simple. Like, in *Ways to Make Sunshine*, she's having to think about sharing and cooperation and selfishness and those things that sometimes we kind of put aside as soft skills—when really they are

crucial skills to have in life and in any workplace, in any relationship that you're going to have, those skills are important.

And I can always tell the adults who, when they were children were probably selfish, and probably weren't good listeners and probably… you don't become that way overnight.

Yeah, I'm always thinking of, whether it's obvious, like with *Betty Before X*, where it's clearly like, her family was a family that did activism in this very big, traditional way. Or if it's smaller, maybe less obvious, with Ryan, where she's learning how to share space and is going to have to be a big sister. She's learning how to assert herself and then also when to pull back. I think all of those skills are important for young people to see characters navigating those waters. Because they are navigating those waters, they're just they're just younger. But it's the same stuff that they're dealing with that adults are dealing with. So yeah, I'm thinking of that a lot when I write.

Jenn: Oh, that's also, when we think about *Betty Before X*, in particular, that first chapter really hit me, of what she sees.

Renée: Yeah.

Jenn: 'Cause you get right into it, though. But there's this kind of precedent set in the beginning of not just like: *bam*, where some YA goes, right? Because sometimes the horribleness in YA happens on the first page. But with this one, it is: wow, this is surprising, but there's also the protection element of it, of her wondering what's going on, someone trying to protect her from it. Or her kind of understanding of what's going on, that immediacy of what happens. I feel like that's very important, when you write for younger audiences, too, is there's a level of immediacy.

Renée: For sure. Yeah, there's—and questioning, right? I remember being in middle school and younger, elementary school, and I asked so many questions. Why? Why is this happening? How did that happen?

Well, who, you know, I was always, my mother used to call me her "Why Child," because I was always asking why. And I think a lot of young people are noticing what's happening in the world, but they can't make sense of it. And so in that scene, where she—you're referring to the lynching, right?—where she sees this *horrific* thing happening, but she's a child so she doesn't fully understand what's happening. But she can tell, I mean obviously, you know, she can tell that this is a bad thing. This is tragic, and she's scared, and she can see through the body language of her aunt that we *should* be scared.

And I think young people pick up on the cues from adults. And a lot of times, I'm speaking for myself anyway, when I was a kid, I would pick up on those cues, but and ask the questions, but I wouldn't always get an answer. You know, I am of the generation, where adults were like, "Stay in your place, go over there. We're talking over here." And they had their very adult conversations. And so I want young people to have some

answers, because I think they are asking questions about this world, and I respect them enough that they can handle answers. It just needs to be in bite-sized pieces.

And so I don't want to ever re-traumatize or traumatize a young person. I try to make sure like, in that scene, you know, I wasn't going to describe a lynching at detail, because that's unnecessary. That's not the point of the scene. And I don't want to do things for shock value. And *What Momma Left Me*, there's an abusive relationship with the parent, and I go there, but I do try to have restraint of you know what's happening but it's not overly graphic. Because we can use our imaginations for certain things. We don't need that on the page.

[30:05]

But the emotion I think we need on the page, and the questioning, and the rage, I think is okay to have on the page. Because that's what's happening, I think anyway, with young people, and what's going on with them. So, yeah, I try to pull back and not have too much of a graphic theme. I will do shorter sentences. And we've talked about this too, about, I'm good for a quote opening up as a segment of the book or some kind of pause. Like in *Piecing Me Together*, she makes collages. So I would actually have her make them in the book, so that the reader gets a moment of breath and just a moment to exhale if something intense has just happened. So, I'm thinking of how do I take care of my readers, especially my middle grade readers, when I'm dealing with heavier topics. I think that's important. I feel very responsible, as the adult telling the story, that I don't cause pain or injure young people emotionally.

Jenn: And that goes to that responsibility.

Renée: Yeah, the pressure I was talking about earlier. That's the kind of pressure I'm thinking about. I mean, of course, winning awards is amazing. I don't understand when people say, "I didn't even know I could win this," or "I don't even think about that." Like, "Oh, okay, well, I think about it." But that's not the pressure for me. And the motivator for me. I'm motivated by young people and by doing right by them and their teachers.

I mean, honestly, I know a lot of educators who want to have serious conversations in the classroom but feel like they don't have the tools. And so I think, hopefully using our books, and the last, so many of the books that are out right now and have come out in recent years, are ways that conversations can be started. Because you're talking about the characters. You don't quite yet have to tell your own personal stories.

And so many of us have teacher guides that go along with our books. So I'm thinking about all of the readers—first the child, but then the parent and the teacher—who are coming to this story and what do they need from it? And so I think about that a lot, like how could this be used in the classroom? Which also means it can't be too over-the-top graphic, vulgar, etcetera, because you know, it needs to be appropriate. So yeah, all of that is kind of in my mind. Or at least maybe not the first drafts, but definitely in those final revisions, I kind of go back and take out or add in depending on what's needed.

Jenn: I can picture you going to the page: “Don't traumatize these kids, Renée!”

[laughter]

Renée: Oh no.

Jenn: “I mean, get started, but don't traumatize these children!”

Renée: I think that sometimes in the sake, in the name of keeping it real, people have done too much.

Jenn: I agree! I do not disagree with you.

Renée: We have to think about: what are we doing this for it? I've been the child that have had, you know, that’s had a guest speaker or someone come in and just, it was inappropriate. It was too much for me to see images of, or you know, or that person wasn't really qualified or prepared to actually be leading that conversation. So that's what I mean. Like, I definitely want to set educators up for success and for them to have healthy, safe dialogue with their young people. So I feel like I got to give them material that's going to help them do that.

Jenn: And it's been recognized so well, and I've just been so ecstatic to see that recognition of, you’ve also become an ambassador for America, due to your work. Like when you went to New Zealand and Australia, that's a huge thing. You know what I mean? Because like, I know people of color in New Zealand and Australia, but then you actually know someone who goes there and talks and you're just like, “Wow, I mean, that’s where Lord of the Rings was filmed. That's wild.” Which you know they hate. They probably are like, “That's the only thing you know about our country.” I’m like, “Yes, that is the only thing.”

Renée: Traveling overseas has really been so fulfilling and so eye opening. Like, in so many ways. I felt like, “Okay, this is just a cliché people say: ‘Stories connect us. We're all human. Young people are young people everywhere.’” Right? And it's cliché because it is true. Like, it is the thing. And to have these stories that are about African-American girls, in most cases that live in Portland, Oregon, of all places literally go across the world. I mean, I was honored, but also once I got there to see young people there so identifying with Jade, and with Maya and Nikki, and with Serenity, it just blew my mind that my work had reached that far.

And then it was just this kind of laughable moment of, “Well, of course, they're teenagers, and they're young people, and they, you know, in their own ways, are having the same issues everywhere.” So, even in Hong Kong, I was there for *This Side of Home*. And we were talking about gentrification without naming that word. But that's what was being described to me. And a lot of the elders were present. And they were talking about a lot of their cultural spaces being torn down and becoming more Western. And we just

had this amazing conversation about what gets lost when newness comes in, and everyone thinks this is the best thing, and this is going to be so good, but you're losing your heritage and you're losing so much. And how do you hold on to your roots *and* accept change? And we had great conversation, but never in a million years would I have thought I would be having a conversation about that overseas because of one of my books.

So yeah, I'm grateful, and I take it seriously. So, I also want to make sure that I'm doing the work and thinking about, well, what *do* I have to say actually, about these things? Because young people, they're serious. Their questions are se-ri-ous. I don't, I never get the simple little questions. I get young people asking me big questions that sometimes feel unanswerable, right? And I've loved that they want to jump in and just go into real dialogue right away with me, that they trust me, that something that's happened in the exchange of reading the books, that when I'm there in person, they're like, "We ready. Ooh, we have a lot of questions for you, and we want to talk." And I love that. So, I've had really great, meaningful conversations with young people literally around the world. And it's changed me, and I think it's made me a better writer.

Jenn: That's legacy right there. And they have your catalog.

Renée: [laughs] The catalog, yes.

Jenn: That's what got Renée an ambassadorship. The full breadth of work. 'Cause she did the work, y'all. So, I'm excited because *Ways to Make Sunshine* comes out April 28 from Bloomsbury Kids, and y'alls can pre-order it. The cover is just… I love this cover so much. I love, love, love this art. I love this artist. I want to shout her out again. Nina Mata. M-A-T-A is her surname. It's so gorgeous. So, so good.

And congratulations to you on this latest one, and all the many, many, many, many, many, many more books—

Renée: Thank you.

Jenn: —you're producing, Renée.

Renée: Thank you. Thank you.

Jenn: So how may peeps get in touch, buy your books, keep updated? You also have a newsletter, yes?

Renée: Yes, I have a newsletter, you can subscribe to on my website. My website is my name, reneewatson.net. And my name is with two E's R-E-N-E-E. And you can, I always encourage people to buy books locally from independent bookstores so, or you know, IndieBound, go online and purchase that way.

So yeah, you can also, from my website, it's linked to bookstores as well, o you can get the book that way too.

Jenn: And I also want to make sure to mention the Highlights Foundation Black Women Writers Retreat. Because is the application deadline April 30?

Renée: Yes.

Jenn: I saw a lot of interest already on the interwebs! So this is the Highlights Foundation and I, Too Arts, which you founded, coming together and creating a Black Woman Writers Retreat for Children's Lit writers. And there's also potential for scholarship.

Renée: Yes. And illustrators, too. I know we're going to fix the wording. Illustrators are coming.

Jenn: Oh, wonderful!

Renée: Yes, we have illustrators as faculty Shadra Strickland will be in the house. So yeah, it's for writers and illustrators who identify as black women. This is, I'm so grateful for Highlights—and also, shout out to Bloomsbury for sponsoring and bringing the price down. I was so moved by this community, who came—and you included—alongside me to help with I, Too Arts Collective back in 2016. And closing, and at the end of 2019, was heartbreaking and sad.

And we still wanted to, even though we were not an official nonprofit and we weren't going to be at the Langston Hughes House anymore, wanted to think of ways to still honor our mission and what we stood for. And the purpose. And gathering was such a big part of it, and making sure that underrepresented voices had a space to create and grow and learn from each other.

So, I so appreciate that Highlights reached out to us and wanted to partner and figure out a way to still keep some type of programming going. So, we don't know yet. Maybe this will be annual, but we're definitely having it this year. And it's a way to honor the work that the collective did. So yeah, I'm excited and I hope people come, and we're going to have a great time. We're gonna talk about the business side of it. I think, there's so many questions about agents and contracts and book tours and how do you balance it all? And what is, you know, how do you wait for the honorarium and the advance, and make a living as a writer. So, we'll talk about some of those just practical things, and then there'll be time to create and just love on each other as black women.

[40:04]

Jenn: It's so great. Go to the Highlights Foundation website. And it's right there. The I, Too Arts scholarship is another, a separate page. So make sure to apply for that separately. And then there's the actual retreat, which is on another page, and lists the

schedule and that Renee will be there and Shadra, and Olugbemi, Tracey Baptiste, Cheryl Hudson, and Nikki Grimes and Edith Campbell.

Renée: Yes.

Jenn: Yay! We have a slew of powerful, amazing black women that will be there for a weekend. And just *blackness*, yes! It's melanated!

Renée: It is! All this melanin in one place, I love it!

Jenn: And the retreat is in September, but please make sure to get your applications in ASAP.

Renée: Yes.

Jenn: Yay! So, thanks again, Renée for being on. Again, *Ways to Make Sunshine* comes out April 28. And that's coming soon because this episode is airing before that. So you can preorder, you can buy in bulk for your students—however you may be teaching them, remotely or face-to-face.

Renée: Oh, I hope it's face-to-face.

Jenn: And congratulations on everything, Renée, you are literally a beacon of light in this whole industry, and I'm so glad you exist.

Renée: Oh, I appreciate that. I'm glad you exist, too, my friend. Thank you.

Jenn: Yay. And thanks again for listening to the Minorities in Publishing podcast. Once again, you can find it on Twitter @MinoritiesinPub. You can sign up for the newsletter, which is pinned on the Twitter page. And at Tumblr at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com