

COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE # 118

Guest(s): Laurel Snyder

Host(s): Rachel Zucker

Transcript by: Leigh Sugar

Transcripts formatted after those from [Disability Visibility Project](#)

Please note: transcripts are transcribed directly from recordings of live conversations; as a result, quotes and statements may be approximate and there may be unintended memory errors.

For more information, visit <https://www.commonpodcast.com/>

Contact us [HERE](#)

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, it's definitely recording.

LAUREL SNYDER: So should we try to not talk over each other [laughs]?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, we should try. I mean, we should always try not to talk over each other. Okay, so let me just say a few things. I'm very nervous about this in a way that I am not usually nervous about this and, let's get let's get our nervousness out.

Okay, we can either cut this or not. So the thing that I'm most nervous about is not that we one of us will say something that we don't want to say, I'm not actually that nervous about that.

I've been looking forward to this for so long we've had basically, I don't know a hundred Commonplace conversations, by which I mean talking about, like, art and our real lives and our friendship and, you know, what is an artist and, like, what is

genre and, like, all the things that I want to talk about on Commonplace all the time. But we haven't recorded those.

And so my biggest worry is that it will be over [laughs]. And we'll both be like, but we didn't, that wasn't what I... And so I think it's good to, like, say that right out there.

LAUREL SNYDER: Yeah, no, I think that I know the depth of our conversations and I know that a one hour segment of them can't do what they do.

It's funny, it's sort of like, like when I teach picture book writing, I teach, I teach away from, what you might think of as like craft or quality, where like, like it tends to be about how like *not* to develop a character, or how *not* to try to tell a message or a theme, or how like the sort of, because there just isn't the space in a picture book to do that, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: So are, maybe we're having a picture book.

LAUREL SNYDER: Yes, we're having a picture book, right [laughs]? This is the picture book version of the novel that is 15 years of conversation.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, so that's, that's like, first of all, a perfect place to start because you're the first person that I've had on Commonplace who is primarily, you're not the first person who's written a picture book on Commonplace, um, but you're the first person who's primarily known for being a YA author and a picture book author or kid lit. What is your preferred..?

LAUREL SNYDER: I don't actually write young adult. Um, there's a line between middle grade and young adult. But, nobody else needs to... like, it's not important to me, really.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, okay. If it's important, then I'd like to call you by the right things.

LAUREL SNYDER: I would say I write books for young readers, or I write books for children.

[Music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello and welcome to episode 118 of Commonplace with my dear friend [Laurel Snyder](#), who writes books for children. Laurel Snyder is the author of eight novels for children, including, most recently, [The Witch of Woodland](#), [My Jasper June](#), and [Orphan Island](#), as well as many picture books, including the [Charlie & Mouse Books](#), with Emily Hughes, [Endlessly Ever After](#), with Dan Santat, [Bruce Springsteen: A Little Golden Biography](#), with Jeffrey Ebeler, and [Swan: The Life and Dance of Anna Pavlova](#), with Julie Morstad. Laurel has written two collections of poems, *Daphne and Jim*, a choose your own adventure biography and verse, and [The Myth of the Simple Machines](#). She's also edited an anthology of nonfiction, [Half/Life: Jew-ish Tales from Interfaith Homes](#).

A graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop and a former Michener Engel Fellow, Laurel has published work in the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Utney Reader, the Chicago Sun Times, and elsewhere.

She teaches in the MFA-C program at Hamline University. A Baltimore native, Laurel lives in Atlanta with her family. Laurel and I recorded the conversation you're about to hear in my home in New York City at the end of May 2023.

[00:05:00]

She was staying with me for four nights while attending several literary events. It's always enormous fun having Laurel stay with me. And it was delightful to finally record a conversation with her. We've been having conversations about art and life for almost 20 years.

In this conversation, we talk about poetry, children's books, the relationship between poetry and picture books, money, Iowa, music, the affect of necessity, chance, and advice from our mentors on each of our careers, and much more.

For this episode, some members of the [Commonplace Book Club](#) will receive a bundle of Laurel Snyder's books for children, courtesy of Chronicle Books or Walden Pond Press. Many thanks to Chronicle for copies of the *Charlie and Mouse* books illustrated by Emily Hughes, and Walden Pond Press for *The Witch of Woodland*, *My Jasper June*, and *Orphan Island*.

All [Patrons](#) will get access to a really fun 35 minute audio extra. I recently hosted Laurel again for a few nights a few weeks ago. I compiled a list of the authors we mentioned in the episode, and I asked Laurel if we could pick a poem or prose excerpt from each author and read back and forth. So in this audio extra, you'll hear Laurel and I read poems or prose by Marvin Bell, Jorie Graham, Gary Blankenburg, W.D. Snodgrass, Bradley Paul, Carl Sandburg, Theodore Roethke, James Galvin, Edward Eager, and Thisbe Nissen. And you'll hear both of us try to read, and mostly fail to read, songs by Jason Isbell and talk about the fluid line between poems and songs.

For the past six months, I've been gradually emptying a storage unit that mostly contains boxes of my mother's out-of-print picture books, which she bought 15 to 20 years ago from her publishers, rather than have them be remaindered.

As an incentive to new and current patrons, I'm offering a bundle of books, which will include a signed copy of *The Slidy Diner* by Laurel Snyder, courtesy of the author, as well as three picture books by Diane Wolkestein. This offer is available to the first eight people who sign up to become new Commonplace [Patron](#) at the \$10 or above tier, or to current Commonplace patrons who increase their current tier by \$10.

As you know, Commonplace has no ads, no corporate funding, and no institutional support. It costs about twice as much to make Commonplace as I bring in through [Patreon](#), and I don't pay myself. So I'll be doing a bit of fundraising in the next few months. Please bear with me. It's my least favorite part of making Commonplace.

To become a Commonplace patron, please visit [Patreon](#) or [Commonpodcast.com](#), where you can also sign up for the commonplace [Newsletter](#), which goes out once per episode and often has special notifications for upcoming events and classes.

For example, I've decided to drop the price for the listener only portion of upcoming [Reading with Rachel](#) sessions. Reading with Rachel meets online the last Tuesday of each month. November 28th, we will meet to discuss *Tanya*, by Brenda Shaughnessy. December 26th, we'll discuss [Milkweed Smithereens](#) by Bernadette Mayer. January 30th will be [The Ferguson Report: An Erasure](#) by Nicole Seeley. February 27th, We'll read [The Black Period: On Personhood Race and Origin](#) by Hafiza Augustus Geter. To find out more about Reading with Rachel or any of the other Commonplace School classes, please visit the [Commonplace](#) website or email rachel@commonpodcast.com.

For this episode, Commonplace's charitable partner will donate 250 to [Charis Circle](#). Charis Circle, Laurel Snyder's local feminist bookstore, works with artists, authors, and activists from across the South and around the world to bring innovative, thoughtful, and life changing programming and events to feminist communities. Charis is Metro Atlanta's only publicly accessible dedicated feminist space, open 7 days a week, 360 days a year. Charis hosts more than 270 events a year, from writing groups, to poetry open mics, to children's story hours, to yoga, to intersectional strategy sessions.

And now, here is my conversation with the brilliant, the quirky, the delightful, Laurel Snyder.

[9:52]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Let's first do the thing that they do in bad sitcoms [laughs] where they're like, *remember the times...* that no one does in real life? Okay, so you're Laurel Snyder. And we met on the Poet Moms Listserv, which is a moderated [laughs], a lightly moderated Listserv started by Arielle Greenberg 18 years ago. I love the way I'm like, *let's talk about you by starting by how we met, because your life started with our relationship now.*

LAUREL SNYDER: In some ways, that's where these conversations begin with me. I would say you, our conversations are the center of how I have spent the last 18 years thinking about craft and all of the things.

RACHEL ZUCKER: How, do you remember how we sort of became special poetmom friends?

LAUREL SNYDER: I don't. And I've tried actually to go back and find the very beginning, but I don't think I was using the same email or, I don't know, like I, I, there are a couple of relationships in my life where I've tried to go back and find the oldest email, and it's clear to me that it's not going all the way back.

But Judah and Lewis were born at the same... but we were already on the list, at that point, because I joined the list when my older son, Moes, was born. It's weird to call him my older son, Moes, but here we are. Uh, and then I feel like Lewis and Judah were born at the same time, basically. And it must have been there.

I feel like it must have been. Right.

RACHEL ZUCKER: We'll come back to our relationship in a second, but tell the people listening where you're from, and some stuff like that.

LAUREL SNYDER: Um, so I'm from Baltimore. Um, and I, uh, And maybe, maybe Iowa is part of how, like it may be that like we had Lewis and Judith in common and we both had the Iowa experience and I was sort of still processing and letting go of that.

And I'm trying to remember who else on the list was Iowa at that point. In those early days it may not have been, it may have just been us. I don't remember. But I'm from Baltimore. I went to college. I've been writing since I was a kid. I've been writing since I was about eight. That was all I ever wanted to be, really.

Uh, and then I went to college in Tennessee, at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. And then I went to the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, and - for poetry. And then, uh, I, I got married and moved to Atlanta, Georgia for a day job. And had a baby very quickly. And so very suddenly my life... and that's Ginsberg. Listeners will know [laughs].

And, and so my life sort of like, I had always been a writer. I had always wanted to be a writer. And then I had sort of, I had, I hadn't really thought ahead beyond the Writer's Workshop. And then the writer's workshop was over, and real life began. And I was a mom and a wife and... somebody who didn't know what to do next. I knew I wanted to keep writing, but poetry had become very hard for me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, and so I remember Marvin Bell was an important teacher for both of us. I remember, he was my first workshop teacher at Iowa, and I think, I didn't realize that the, like I went there to study with Jorie Graham, but then I was like, I didn't get to have Jorie as my workshop teacher until later, which was actually so lucky for me.

But, I, I had a conference with Marvin, and he said to me, *You don't blink very much* [laughs]. *Have you considered being on television?*

Now, am I right that Marvin suggested to you to, to try other genres?

LAUREL SNYDER: I think I always wanted to do everything. As a kid, I wanted to write, I wanted to become rich and famous writing books and plays for children.

That was the plan. And then my best friend and I were going to buy a big mansion and live in it forever with all the dogs and cats in the city. Um, that was, I mean, that was the plan. We had this plan. We had a company we started called Sewell Larson. Sewell Larson Incorporated. We are going to write books and plays together.

So I had this sort of childhood dream of children's literature that I just thought of as books, right? Because that's what I read at that time. And then I got to high school and we had a creative writing teacher at my public high school in Maryland named Gary Blankenberg, who, who had studied with Snodgrass and wrote and published in small press magazines and had his own little press. Um, sort of, it, it, that was really important and informative for me. And, and because I think I was, there were poetry classes and not fiction classes, at that stage, it really became poetry. But it, it, I mean, I had always loved poetry.

I'd always read, read and memorized poetry. Read memorized and, and then Gary, the teacher at my high school sort of knew of this program at UTC and Kathy Wagner had gone down and Milli Bentley and Bradley Paul had gone down ahead of me to this program in Chattanooga that had offered a big scholarship.

[14:53]

And so basically there was sort of a, it was like I was riding a poetry pipeline and that sort of took me from Catonsville to Chattanooga to Iowa and kind of got me, and I knew about the workshop. When I was 15, in Gary's class, I wanted to someday go to Iowa. And so I kind of rode that along. And the whole time, I still read children's books.

I still read a lot of adult fiction, essay, like, I just always liked lots of genres. And if I'm being honest, reading poetry was never... I love poems, I would get very attached to poetry, in a really childlike way. And I'm, I'm almost, I'm still scared, even with you, even here in this moment, I'm scared to say these words out loud, but like, I liked like Carl Sandburg.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh my god!

LAUREL SNYDER: I liked Roethke, like I liked, I wanted to read things that were much more traditional and got to Iowa with no idea what postmodernism was, really, because even in my college classes I hadn't really read the things I was pretending I was reading because I was going home and reading novels. And so, I mean, I think in some ways, I'm not sure I've ever articulated this, but I think in some ways I was always pretending... not to be a poet, but to be invested in the world of poetry and poetics and craft and theory that I had no interest in reading. And I was sort of pretending to know who these, you know, people were that everyone was talking about.

And so I got to Iowa. and I had Jorie first semester. I admired Jorie. Still, I admired Jorie then. It was not, I think, the right first workshop for me. There were also a couple of very strong personalities in that class and several people who had a book

deal in the first year. And so there was just this hierarchy immediately in place and I had a very contrary response to that. And I got Marvin later.

And he did help me pick up the pieces of sort of where my brain was in Iowa. But I got to Iowa, got very scared. I was told by several other students that sort of I didn't know what I was talking about. And that shut me down. And I went and got a job at a diner called the Hamburgin No. 2, for anyone who's been to Iowa City.

Um, where I spent four years. And through that world, kind of, met a bunch of musicians, and so I was, I wasn't writing poems anymore because I was so scared of the poetry. And, and not poetry, but the poetry world. I was still writing little bits in, around the edges, but I, it didn't feel comfortable about my place in that community.

And all of the people that I knew through the diner were musicians. And so I started playing around with songwriting and lyric writing. And I made a little demo of country songs, and I also started doing some lyric essay stuff because there were people, John D'Agata was in the non fiction program at that time.

So I was sort of starting to be aware that there were other things out there. And then, I think the order of things was that, while I was then working in the restaurant after I'd graduated, I had started to write these country songs. My, my like, my like senior reading was actually a performance and I had several friends come up and accompany me and I just wanted to be honest about it.

And my last workshop at Iowa was with Jim Galvin and I submitted a song instead of a poem.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What did he say?

LAUREL SNYDER: And it felt like this coming out moment of like I'm gonna claim that I don't really write poems right now. This is what I do instead. And he said, he brought in, so I had submitted this, this sheet of lyrics and he brought a cassette player to class, and played some old Greg Brown songs, who was a local musician in Iowa. And we talked, he had rewrote, Greg had made this record, uh,

of *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* by Blake, which is actually a touchstone, like that was an important book for me as a kid. And he played these, these Greg Brown songs, and what he said is, he told some story about Tammy Winnette, and the line was, uh, “Stand by your man and tell the world you love him,” is not poetry until you add the steel guitar.

And it created this whole idea in my head of like, Internal music and external music, and how sort of how poetry and songwriting might relate to one another and it really I mean it was a huge gift he gave me. It didn't make my lyrics a poem, but it gave me a way that wasn't binary to think about the things I was writing as something other than a poem or not a poem.

[Laurel's music]

[20:10]

LAUREL SNYDER: So that was graduation. And then I had this weird job, um, working at the Annals of Otolaryngology at the University Hospital. That Joelle McSweeney actually had right before me, that she had sort of passed along to me that was like, almost like a little fellowship. And I would go to this office every day for hours a day And I just had time to kill. The internet wasn't as seductive at that point, and so I started writing this Children's novel. Um, and, and playing around with picture books and, and that... I don't remember exactly. I like have a way that I retell that story when I talk about it with kids. But it, somehow, it's like something was wrong and I wasn't making work and I went back to reading the children's books that I had loved.

And realized that like, *oh, oh, there is a thing I know and love deeply and can go back to*. And the minute I did that, it became very clear that that was, really, I had known when I was eight years old what I was supposed to do. And I had sort of used this process of education to kind of learn craft tools so that I could then go back and do.

Does that make sense?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah.

LAUREL SNYDER: Oh, and I'm sorry, and you had asked about Marvin. Yeah, yeah. Marvin was the person who I felt safe once I had started writing these children's things and I took him some of them. I had graduated. He was still living in town. And I, like, went to his house and had, like, tea with him and Dorothy and shared these things with him.

And he looked at them and was like, *Wow*. Like, I'm gonna put you in touch with Jane Yolen. And that's what happened. So he put me in touch with Jane Yolen, who was very sweet and, and also honest about, sort of, the likelihood of publishing and how much money I could expect to make and things like that. But I think that was an important series of events, right?

Like, I got scared off of poetry. I met a bunch of people who made music. I tried that, didn't quite work, and then Galvin kind of gave me the permission to go and do other things. And then Marvin supported that and encouraged that, and, and then directed me to the idea that there was a community out there.

And that's probably, it's, looking back at it, it's easy to see the map.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm hmm. And, and then, so, Jane... wasn't, you know, I'm calling her Jane, like I know, okay. I know her now, it's funny, I do. So, but Jane Yolen did not, like, take you under her wing.

LAUREL SNYDER: No, no, no, no, no.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So, so, how did you get, what was your first book that you published?

And how did, well, you had the, you had a chapbook.

LAUREL SNYDER: I had a chapbook of poems and a, I'm trying to remember the order of things. I did a chapbook of poems, while I was still trying to write for grown ups, I did a chapbook of poems and then a book of poems that, uh, read,

published at No Tell Books. But the chapbook was a choose your own adventure chapbook about my parents' courtship and marriage and then I did a collection of poems with No Tell Books and then I did a collection of essays about intermarriage with Soft Skull, with Richard Nash and Shanna Compton.

But those are all people I knew through the poetry world. Like all of that was sort of through poetry land. Uh, the the children's books took a lot longer and, and the first picture book was called *Inside the Slidey Diner* that I wrote about the Hamburg Inn, basically. Mm-Hmm. And the first novel was called *Up and Down the Scratchy Mountains*.

They both came out in 2008, I think, which was eight years after I graduated. So this is all. A story that takes a while.

RACHEL ZUCKER: In 2008... Yeah, Mose was born... Moses was born in 2005.

LAUREL SNYDER: And Lewis was born in 2007. Right. And that was the year, like my life changed like two, 2007, 2000 Moses born. And then I had those poetry books and the essays come out and Mose and I were on the road doing like, you know, like Bowery Poetry Club or whatever.

Mm-Hmm. Like that, like right. That, that kind of stuff. KGB bar, like it, that was one world. Mm-Hmm. . And then Lewis was born in 2007 and then the novel in the Picture book came out the next year. Mm-Hmm. And, and by the time sort of Lewis was a year old, my life was just in a completely different place. And I had two kids and, and sort of the beginnings of a new career.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Although, when I first met you, your career was really interesting because your husband was like a working guy. Yes. And you were, you were, no one would ever describe you as a stay at home mom, but you were with your kids a ton, and you took your kids everywhere.

LAUREL SNYDER: Correct. And... you know, like I wore them for readings, like, like...

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, right.

And you, you were writing... I mean, okay. So how many books have you published now?

LAUREL SNYDER: 30?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, 30 books is a lot, a lot of books.

LAUREL SNYDER: But a lot of them are picture books, which is really like more like a poem, right?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Kind of, but also not. We should talk about how picture books are and are not like poems. But I remember, well, your career has shifted a lot over the years and also the balance or you know, between family, I mean, in large part, you weren't making money in the beginning, and then you were.

[25:11]

LAUREL SNYDER: Right. What I often say to people is, like, if I had not been making so little at my day job when Mose was born, I would not have my career now. Mose required me to quit my job. Like, the child care would have cost more. I was working for Hillel. I was working for a non profit. And I was making like, you know, \$700 every two weeks or something, whatever it was.

And, and I looked at that and realized there's no way I can pay somebody to watch my child so that I can give up 60 hours a week to go work hard at this non profit job. So I sort of had to quit the job. And then the question became like, okay, so we're gonna like go into this super reduced budget. I am going to do whatever I can to make money on the side.

Whether it means taking in other people's children, whether it means, like, whatever I can do with a baby underfoot, I will do to make money to sort of balance things out a little bit. But as long as it doesn't cost me money, I'm alright. And so that was when I went back to this old manuscript sort of box that I had of

like things I had worked on in Iowa that were not poet... I mean, I was also sending out poems and trying to still think of myself primarily as a poet, but I had this box of children's books that I had written, including this novel that had been rejected like literally 50 times. And I thought, well, wait a minute. Like, and honestly, like what I often say is like, babies are boring, like, like infants sleep a lot [laughs].

And I just, you know, didn't have anything to do. And so I thought, *well, maybe there's money in the box*. So in some ways it's like, if I hadn't stayed home... this is a very privileged thing to be able to say, but like, if I hadn't stayed home, you know, and if Chris hadn't been willing to go to like \$60 a week for groceries or whatever, you know, we went on to a really tight budget.

But if, if I hadn't stayed home, I would not have been able to invest the time in myself and my writing that I did. And once I had sold the first book and gotten an agent, then it was like, *oh, this is a, this is a job, like this could potentially turn into a job*. And then Chris lost his job, and um, I had this new agent, the first book hadn't come out yet, but I remember like calling my agent and saying, sort of, my husband lost his job, and I'm, and I was pregnant with Lewis, my husband lost his job, I'm pregnant, and I need, he was, Chris was also in school at the time, and we could buy health insurance through the school if I had eight thousand dollars.

So I called my agent and said, *I need eight thousand dollars, to buy health insurance so that I can have this baby. How, how can you help me with that?* And she was like, that's not really what I do [laughs]. Like, what would you do for \$8,000 because I'd already sold the first book. And, uh, you know, and I had no record. I had no history. And so I, like, had to dream up a project and she called the editor that had bought the first book and said, *Laurel needs \$8,000 to have a baby. Can you buy another book from her?* Like, I don't know, that conversation, it would be wonderful to be able to hear it now. And my editor basically was like, let's, we'll figure this out.

And together they figured out how to make, get, get me the money that I needed to have a baby. And then I had, like, a year to crank out another novel. And that was really the beginning of my, like, it's like, necessity is the mother of invention,

right? Like, now I have to write a second novel. It's taken me 10 years to write the first one. I don't know how I did it. I've never taken a fiction class. No idea what I'm doing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, so wait, what was your, what was that novel?

LAUREL SNYDER: That was called *Any Which Wall*, and the reason I wrote, it was a, it's a tribute, it's a tribute to the Edward Eager books, and I thought I can, I can mimic, I can mimic *Half Magic*.

I'll just take it apart, and I'll put it back together again with contemporary kids and like that I can do in a year, I think. And somehow that happened.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wow, okay. So this is great because I would say of the things that we talk about, money is in the top three, and not just money but like the relationship between art and money and structure and money and structure and art and necessity and priorities and audience.

Yeah. Yeah This is the question that I'm having trouble answering. I mean asking. And it just keeps coming up and I'm just gonna say it this way and then I'm gonna restate it in a nicer way. Okay? Okay, Josh, which I [laughs], you know in some ways his story was very similar to yours in the sense that he grew up just reading and particularly loving a certain kind of book for him it was not exactly, it wasn't the Edgar books. It was these kind of like sci fi, you know, um, Tarzan, um, you know, serial novel. And he just, I mean, that was like the golden age of literature for him.

[30:10]

And so we moved to Iowa and I was in the workshop and he was not. And that was an interesting, it wasn't like he had always wanted to be a writer, but he had, I don't think he'd always wanted to necessarily be anything, but reading was always his deepest passion and books and then he got that job at Scattergood friends school because we literally -

LAUREL SNYDER: I also applied for a job at scatter good friends school!

RACHEL ZUCKER: We literally looked in the yellow pages under “education” because he had no idea what to do. Yeah, and and and we were like, well, what do you know how to do?

Nothing. You've gone to school. So and you like school and you're good at school, right? Um, and he had he had gotten like a temporary job working for these three older women a Scandinavian publishing company where they published Scandinavian cookbooks okay, because there's a large Scandinavian population in Iowa and Midwest and he got free lunch and like minimal amount of money.

And he would go there with him and these three old ladies and have like jello salad for lunch [laughs]. And like his big plan to like make a mark at this job was he was going to try to get these cookbooks, which were index card size with spiral tops. He was going to try to convince all the Hy Vees to put these, like a rack with the, with the cookbooks in the cooking section.

LAUREL SNYDER: Not a bad idea!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Anyway, um, at the very last minute, somebody in August, in like late August, somebody was sick and they needed a teacher and he ended up, you know, you know, uh, teaching at Scattergood for two years and hadn't really been interested in teaching, right, but loved reading. And so then he applied to get a PhD and, you know, ended up going to Columbia. But his real passion was reading, not writing critical stuff and he didn't really want to go on the job market. So after he, you know, while he was writing his dissertation and then even more so afterwards, he started writing all of these, I would call them YA, you know, some middle grade, but YA, um, books.

And he wrote like eight, eight, at least eight full manuscripts. Had an agent and then had a different agent and then had a different agent and then had a different agent. And ultimately it was just miserable. And we had kids by then. And so I guess... and we can keep this in because it's not mean it's it's just ultimately he... it was not a good life for him.

It was... and I it's never been.... and then he transitioned to teaching, which I think was really in the beginning so much grief and grieving for him that he, I think he really, at that point, he really wanted to be a writer. And so to transition into teaching felt like a failure to him, even though he is, this is exactly the job he should be, he should have.

LAUREL SNYDER: There are three different, probably more, but there are at least three differences in the story. Mm hmm. And one is... that I was a, I'm going to get in trouble for saying this maybe, um, one is that I'm a woman. And I wanted to stay home with my children and I wanted to nurse my children and I wanted to sleep with my child, like I wanted my life to be about the babies.

I didn't want to let go of my writer self but by no means was being a writer more important to me than being a mom. I felt like the writing facilitated the and the staying home facilitated the writing. So, and it's the most paired thing that's ever happened in my life. Those two things happened simultaneously and felt like they reinforced each other, and I used to say to people all the time, like, *I feel so lucky because I don't have that feeling that I'm just like that feeling that friends would describe to me that they had given up their careers, they were just a mom and that that did not feel like enough, nor did I have a feeling that sort of I wasn't, I wasn't having kids and I wasn't starting my family.*

So I feel like those two things went together. That's one thing. The second thing is that I wasn't living in New York, and we were living in Atlanta at a moment where, I mean Lewis was born in 2007 the world fell apart in 2008, which was terrible and made things very hard... my husband lost his job, but we were also paying like nine hundred dollars a month in mortgage and we I could walk to the grocery store if I needed to and we could live on... I mean we turned off the internet, we turned and we didn't have the internet yet, but we like turned off the cable TV and turned off the air conditioning and we were able to reduce our lives in a way that I think would not have been possible if Josh had said I want to stay home and write and not make any money it, like, it, New York's just a different lifestyle and world.

[35:22]

Yeah. So that's the second thing. And the third thing is, I didn't want to be an author. That wasn't my goal. I was just a writer who'd gotten up and written every day since I was eight years old. I got very, very lucky that I stumbled into good fortune. And I'm, I am somebody who sort of, my, my, the, one of my early publishers, Richard Nash, at Soft Skull, once asked me, I, you know, I'd gotten some article, you know, reviewed, or something had happened, and he said, *Why do people do things for you?*

And I said, *Because I ask them.* Um, and I, I, I hope not in an obnoxious way, but I feel like I'm somebody who tries the doorknob. So there's that, but it was never, I never sought to be an author. I wanted to be a writer. And at some point it became real to me that, that like to have a career as a writer meant I had to make money out of it or, or get a teaching job out of it. Or like there had to be some way that this sustained itself. But I was okay with, I mean I never, I never did a lot of the things that Josh did. Like I just kinda kept trucking along and periodically put things in drawers and took them back out again.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's so, it's so interesting. So, so, yeah, so you and I connected on so many different levels. Yeah. We weren't at Iowa at the same time, but we'd both been at Iowa. We'd studied, you know, both of us had studied with Marvin, with Jim Galvin, with Jorie Graham. You know, and then you continued to live there, so like, you know, I knew the landscape, I knew the city, I knew what that felt like, and then, um, I had two older kids, but, you know, we, I, we also connected around the fact that like, you know, my two older kids are 18 months apart, your kids are 18, two boys, um, and so even though,

LAUREL SNYDER: And Jewish -

RACHEL ZUCKER: Absolutely. I don't know, I think that there's a certain, um, I love the description of, like, I'm the one who tries the door. I mean, I have that also. You know, like, we're both very ambitious in a very particular kind of way. Like, you say, like, I didn't really expect to be an author.

LAUREL SNYDER: I don't think it's ambition.

I, I think we both stay busy. Like, I think we just can't sit still. And I, I, it's funny, recently, it has come to my attention recently that I probably have undiagnosed ADHD, right? Like, I'm just, I've also never had a desk job. Like, there's just a certain kind of activity and energy that I have that means that I always, it's like I'm, I feel like I'm like a shark who can't stop swimming or something.

Like, I have to always be looking at the next thing. And it can be really annoying for the people around me. And it can mean that I leave jobs quickly. It used to mean that I broke up with people very rapidly. You know, like, I'm always moving forward. But I think we're very similar in that way. But I don't think of it as ambition. I don't set the goal. It's more that I want to do the activity.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I think that's right. And I think that's, that's very similar for me, too. Because there's not, it's not like, *I want to be Jorie Graham*. Right. Or, you know, it's like, as soon as I have five minutes, I either have another child [laughs], or I move, or I start a new job, or I start a new career, or I like, I'm like, oh, now I'm a doula, uh, you know, now I'm starting a podcast.

LAUREL SNYDER: You, I'm literally sitting here next to a wall that has cards on it of projects you have finished that are not published. I similarly have like 200, or something, 150 unpublished picture book manuscripts and several novels sitting in drawers. Because the work gets made.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes. Yes, yeah, and yeah, okay, and then, you know, because even though I have never published, uh, a picture book or a middle grade book, having been raised by my mom, um, you know, and then especially when my mom died, you were incredibly helpful to me emotionally, but also in like trying to think about her literary estate and, you know, what, have some insight into that world from a, from a professional perspective.

LAUREL SNYDER: And, and if I'm being, I was just sitting here thinking about this. If I'm being super honest, I think when we very first met, your career was very far ahead of mine. I think when we very first met, I was a little starstruck that like, you knew this poetry world in a way that I had not... I had been so insecure about it

and had such a chip on my shoulder about it that you were sort of in that world in a way that I had been afraid to keep trying at.

And, and somehow being friends with you, not in a crass way, but like That somehow being friends with you... that if Rachel wanted to talk to me about poetics, maybe I wasn't a failure at poetry.

[40:06]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I think it's really interesting because I was very jealous of you. I feel like I've always wished that I made something that I could give as a gift. Like, my books are not good gifts [laughs]. Okay, no, they're depressing as fuck. And like, most people don't like poetry and most people don't read poetry and are just like, *Oh my God*, when can I like, I told you the story, but I went to function recently for the daycare center that my kids used to go to that I'm like really still involved with and I love this place so much and you know it was it was a fundraiser and so they had an auction and all the stuff and and I was like *Oh, do you want me to bring some copies of my mom's books?*

And they were like, *Yeah, bring some copies of your mom's book and your books* and I was like *Really really you don't want that* and there they convinced me to bring copies of my of my new book right that had just come out and I got there and I, like, just gave them, like, four copies of, like, my mom's picture books and, and then, like, four copies of, like, I don't know, *Poetics of Wrongness* or *Sound*, it was probably, like, *Sound Machine* or whatever.

And once I got there, I realized it was a whiskey and chocolate tasting thing and then they were selling raffle tickets. And people were buying, were winning with these raffle tickets either a bottle of whiskey or my book! [Laughs].

It was awful. Nothing feels so terrible as watching people, like, win the book and just like their face fall. Like it could have been whiskey, could have been a piece of chocolate. Right. And they would have been like, *Fantastic*. And I just was like, *Oh my God, like how, how have I come to this? Like, it took me 10 years to write*

this book. And like, I just wanted to go up to the person and be like, Just give it back to me.

I'll pay you. I'll buy my book back from you. Or like, just throw it in the trash. Like, I'm so sorry. Like I'll buy you a bottle of whiskey. Like it just, it's the worst. It's the worst feeling. I'm so sorry. I don't mean to be laughing. No, it's. It's terrible. It's painfully funny. I want, I want a picture book that I can like give to people and they can be like, thank you. This is so great.

I'll, you know, and I still have this experience with my mom's books, which, you know, I, I still have so many copies of them and so I, I give them away and you know, people read them hundreds and hundreds of times. Some of them are fantastic books, you know, for a long time I've wanted to write, I mean I did write a memoir.

Nobody thinks that I wrote a memoir because it's like an unmarketable, unsellable, un, you know, market memoir, but whatever. And I do write prose, but like somehow I'm a poet, always, which is good and bad.

LAUREL SNYDER: Yeah, I mean it is, right, and I flip flop back and forth between I think which is better, uh, uh, sort of, that there's a way in which, well, this does, this takes us into the genre stuff, but like, there's a way, and having lived in both those worlds in different ways, there's a way in which money, I'm gonna regret saying this, but like that, because I don't love money, but money keeps things honest in a way, because, because in the arts without money, you have to establish some other sort of currency to stand in, that in a world where it isn't about how many books sell, or how many people read it, or whatever, it has to then become about other things that have always made me really uncomfortable. The flip side of that is, once money enters the picture, then things can be manipulated, and like, it's an easy currency to manipulate, right?

And so, you can make a book successful. You can make a career for somebody for a book, you know, and and and and I'm not even getting into like what's valuable like artistically, like if a book is popular and all the kids love it, even if I think it's

terrible, that's a good book. I mean, that is where working with children is very different.

They do not pretend things, you know, if if they want *Dogman* or *Percy Jackson* or *The Warriors* and and I show up, they have no problem letting me know I am NOT who they would like to meet.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You're not a bottle of whiskey [laughs].

LAUREL SNYDER: No, I'm exactly and so I think it's it's just an interesting thing of like in some ways, I feel like it's better for art to be art.

That there, that I'm forever, endlessly, really hard right now trying to get back to the brain that I had when I was eight. That just wrote. And some of, some of, you know, it's been, always been my principle that, like, I write the words that I'm inclined to write, and some of them are to be published, and some of them are not to be published.

But it, it, it, the longer you spend in the world of commerce, or academia or whatever world you're living in, the harder it is to [00:45:00] get back to that like playful, crafty, imaginative brain that is just playing with words because it's fun. And so I feel like that's what I'm always trying to get back to. And the question is like, is it easier to get back to that by getting the money out of my brain, or is it easier to get back to that by getting the like poetry, insecurity, craft, academia stuff out of my brain? They're both, they're both difficult.

[45:23]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, so, so one of the things I think is really interesting is that we do in some ways live in these different worlds. We're both writers, but we really, we have different audiences, and we have different structures or, or what are they called? Like not signposts, but like measures, measures of success, all that stuff. Benchmarks. I think your name appears in my books more than anyone else's name.

LAUREL SNYDER: It's, it's, it is like a great, great joy of mine. It's like, I cannot tell you what it means to me that I am part of your brain.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You are. And, you're like one of my favorite people in the world to call up and be like, *okay, can I just read you this poem? Can I just read you this poem?* And then I think that maybe in part because there's some space, um, between the worlds? I don't know if that's why...

LAUREL SNYDER: No, I think, I think it's important that we're not in competition.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. I think that's true too, but I think it's, it's, it's, it's not just that. No, it's not just that. There's something about the way, like, getting to, to do, like, parallel play with you all these years. And talk about our careers and and, and, and... the form of the picture book and what a poem is, or like me... yeah.

LAUREL SNYDER: Okay. So there's this other thing though, too, which is, and it's very specific for me. I don't, I, but I think everybody has it to a varying degree, which is, it's not just that, it's not just that you bring a different perspective when you comment on something outside your own area of expertise. It's that there's a kind of humility inherent in what I'm going to say, right?

So if you show me a poem, and it's a little different with the poetry stuff because I feel like I should speak the language better than I do after all these years, but um, but like if my husband's a musician, and when my husband plays me a song there's a part of me that feels like it's almost like an, like an "I'm just a girl" kind of thing.

It's like, "Well, I don't know anything about music, but this is what I think." And then often that person will be like, *that's really smart. Nobody said that.* And the, it's like, it's both that I can, I can say a thing that I might not say in my own area of expertise because I can bring that sort of novice brain to it, and I don't feel like I have to say it exactly right or use the right language. That I feel that way about, about that gap is like, I'm, I, I want to, I want to think that when you show me a poem, I'm bringing a different brain because I haven't read all the things everybody

else has. And I'm not having whatever this year's craft conversation is in poetry land.

And I am bringing the, I mean, I also teach in an MFA program, right? Like I'm bringing the craft of children's writing in a different way, sort of different kind of language as I'm thinking about your poem, and also, I'm comfortable to say things that might sound dumb coming out of somebody else's mouth because I'm not an expert.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I think also... all that is true and we have a certain level of like trust and familiarity with each other and a certain kind of like, temperament. So you were absolutely critical for me at the, you know, if anybody's read *The Poetics of Wrongness*, I just kept trying and trying and trying to end the book, and I kept doing all this stuff.

I wrote an essay, and then I wrote a different essay, and then I wrote a different essay, and then I had a conversation on the phone with Isaac Ginsberg Miller, and then we made a transcript, and then we edited the transcript, and, uh, I was like, okay, I think I finally got it. I think it's right. I think it's right. I think it's right.

And I sent it to you and I asked you to read, you know, it was this like Afterword, you know, a note from the author and you, I mean, I just remember the tone of your voice. I don't remember the exact words you said, but you were like, yeah, you were scared and you were like, *okay, I don't usually say this to you, but I don't think you can publish this. I don't think this is right. This isn't working.* And, and I mean, and you basically said, I think you're trying to do something that can't really be done. And, once we had that conversation, I mean, first of all, I'm able to hear things from you that would be harder for me to hear from other people. Although, other people don't even offer that to me.

You know, my editors don't, you know. I don't have that, really, in my life. I don't have, which is interesting. And... once I, once I got what you were saying and I started also think about like, *Oh, here's why I'm afraid to publish this book, to finish this book, to close it down, you know, to, to have it be closed as opposed to a conversation* that was, that just, that opened up so much for me.

[50:27]

First of all, I was able to finish the book. Um, But also I think it, I don't even know where, how far that's gonna lead me because it led me to all of these realizations about the podcast. And you listen to the podcast all the time and you will call...

LAUREL SNYDER: It's true! I like having a podcast that I can listen to and then like actually like call in after the fact [laughs].

Yeah. Yeah, I think, well I think that there's another thing too, which probably does relate to everything, but sort of sounds like it doesn't, which is I think you and I are both just really messy. Yeah. And I think that there's very few things as comfortable if you're somebody who's messy and extra and feels like you're always bringing too much of yourself to every room you go to, when you find somebody who is messy and extra in that way, I hope that's okay for you to say -

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, definitely.

LAUREL SNYDER: But who isn't totally batshit. Yeah. And, and I feel like I've spent my life in, in many circumstances or parties, at weddings that I'll never meet these people again, seeking out the like, the extra messy person on the dance floor and then realizing, *Oh, this person's wasted and crazy and I don't want to talk to them on this dance floor.*

That like, with you, I think we settled into some sort of a very comfortable, permissive place of like, *I'm gonna bring my messy self and if you need to hang up the phone, that's fine.* Um, and nothing, I feel like nothing you say would ever push me away and nothing I say would ever push you away. And that's a very rare thing.

Yeah. And the idea of having that within a craft conversation, like, I don't, I mean, I, that's not true. I do have a few other people in my life that I feel like come close to that. But they don't feel as familiar to me or as similar to me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. And you, you've sent me a bunch of, um, you know, stuff in early stages.

And, uh, you know, I don't know anything about, like, picture books are supposed to be like. Um, but I still feel completely fine. I mean, 99.9 percent of the time, I'm like, no, it's not nice. I just, I'm a fan. And I just love what you do, but I'm not at all hesitant to say... I don't like this.

LAUREL SNYDER: But I think I turn to you for the same exact reason, which is that what I am looking for is a not, is somebody from outside what, like, it is still in my head, and this will take us back into crafty stuff, but, but it is still in my head that like, while I write for children, I always want to be bringing poetry to the page.

And I worry sometimes that I've gotten so far away from poetry that I don't always stop. I look back at some of my earlier work and it feels way more interesting and innovative than the things that I'm making right now. And this is a big part of, sort of, I hope, my project for the next year or two, is that I want to go back into the hole.

That, sort of, being in a world of commercial literature, things that have to sell, things that have to, you know, fit the algorithm or whatever, even if you resist it and resist it and resist it, it's really easy to kind of get closer into that groove. And I feel like my best work is not that way.

And so one of the reasons I send you things is I feel like, because you're not in my world, you are going to bring your poet brain to my more commercial, or more, you know, my other thing, um, and push on those things in ways that will help me hold on to the part of me that is a poet

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, I think that the thing that I'm best at, of all the things I'm very good at, is taking anything marketable and making it unmarketable [laughs]. So, you can always rely on me for that. Um, okay, let's talk about picture books and poetry for a second, okay?

So for a long time you have said this thing, some version of, like *the poetry brain and the picture book brain are very similar and very connected and, you know, poets could write good picture books if they set their mind to it and children's*

authors, children's book authors might want to study poetry and learn to write.
Okay, talk about that.

LAUREL SNYDER: So I did this event years ago at the Pratt Institute that was like maybe my favorite event I ever did in my life where I got, I got asked to come in through my poetry world connections and to, to read books for young people and to talk about that. And I did something I've never done before or since, which is I, I mixed my poems, my adult poetry in with my picture book manuscripts and then read them without indicating what was what.

[55:07]

Just because I wanted to see if people could tell, like what's a, like, and my poetry always felt like my master's thesis was called the, what was it called, the story of the girl, *The Tale of the Girl in the Flattened World* or something and then my it turned into a book called *The Myth of the Simple Machines* that was about like this little girl and these birds and gravity disappears and like, I feel like looking back it's really easy for me to see that the poetry was always and, and I think I am in some ways arrested in childhood.

Um, that I am arrested in childhood, I sort of have a childlike brain anyway, and I have always loved books... adult books, kids books, it doesn't matter, that were sort of mythic in those ways. I love magic. I love fantasy. I love simplicity. Uh, I love accessibility. And, and so sort of, those are the things that make poetry and picture books feel similar to me.

I, I think that the best poems. For me, as a reader, the best poems, for me, have the same narrative and lyrical qualities that picture books do. And I think that the best picture books, for me, are difficult, or confusing, or, I'm not, that's confusing is the wrong word. Have layers to them, that, uh, I, I can only think of as poetry.

And I feel like all those tools are the same tools. I have this, this lecture I do sometimes at, at the program where I teach, uh, called the Poetry Handbook... the Poetry Toolbox for Picture Book Writing. That, that it really does, like, you can break it down in, in ways that you would never do in a poetry MFA.

But you can say like, this meter will feel this way, you know, that sort of this is like, what does it do when there's a march or a horse galloping across the page? You know sort of and and we use them as a much heavier hand, children are very different readers, and ultimately that to me is the difference, is like picture books are what happens to poetry when you think of a four year old reader.

Um, and sometimes poetry, I mean there's plenty of poets whose poems work as picture books and vice versa. So, and then the other thing is that I, I feel strongly that picture books are the place in commercial work, right? Sort of setting aside art, that in the, in the, in the sort of, if you go into a bookstore and you buy a mass marketed book from one of the big five publishers, the likelihood that it will be disruptive and experimental is much greater in a picture book than anywhere else in that bookstore.

The picture books don't actually have rules and I have like handouts that I give students of like like different structures and formats for picture books but the truth is there's nothing you can't do in a picture book, and that's always been true pretty much and uh, I think becomes, it's one of the rare areas of publishing where that becomes more true, the readership is becoming more open, more willing to stretch things, and you know we go in and out but if you especially if you look at international stuff like European and and Asian and African picture books do all kinds of things that we don't do here, they are often much darker or more experimental, so studying it as a form it's just it's it does feel to me like sort of I feel like I can sort of see a picture book in any poem and see a poem in any picture book that I like.

There are poems in picture books that I do not like [laughs]. Yeah, so for me it has been the place where, you know, I was trying last year, two years ago now, to work on, I, I had a very, very hard time in the pandemic, both reading and writing, and um, I just needed to sell some, like, I, I was like, I have to sell something, not for money, I mean, that too, but like, I just feel like I've been stopped for several years.

And I tried, I wanted to write a Hanukkah book, and I tried and tried and tried, and I wrote like four failed Hanukkah books, and it was exactly that thing of like, I'm just gonna let go and write a poem. Like, I'm just going to write a poem about

Hanukkah. And I did. And I sent that to my agent. And she was like, *Okay, this is the book.*

And, and that book sold for more than any other picture book I've ever sold. And so it's that thing of like, it's this weird space in the world where if you can remember the language of childhood, which is, like, that's the hardest thing about this job, is like, you're writing in a language you don't speak anymore.

But if you can tap back into the brain of not knowing grammar, or syntax, or what words mean exactly, but sometimes what they mean inexactly, or how they feel, you know, if you're, I mean, you're trying to describe, like, what it feels like to discover what it is to be a person, basically. Not always, but I think the most beautiful, most important picture books do that, sort of hold a kid's hand through discovering something.

[59:52]

Um, which just feels so much like poetry to me. Like, words enacting something, you know? Words creating shapes, words making music.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But why do you... even tolerate me? [Laughs] So let's talk about me some more. Yeah.

LAUREL SNYDER: Um, no, it's one of my favorite subjects. I listen to your podcast, listening to you and I'm like, yeah. Yeah. [Laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, but I'm having this, obviously we've talked so many times but like we haven't really talked about it this way like, I don't write like my, when I read you my poems on the phone, you do like them. I believe you. Um, and you laugh and they're funny and you're like, oh my god, I can't believe you're gonna do this, you know?

Yeah. Um, but they don't, there's no picture book in those poems. And I think it's the, the, the envy that I have. Mm hmm. Is not just that you have something that

people really enjoy and then it can be given as a gift and it can make people feel good.

LAUREL SNYDER: The gift, the gift factor for you is really interesting. It's really big.

RACHEL ZUCKER: It's really big. I know. [Laughs]. I guess I feel like, in some ways, I feel like our brains are so similar. Yeah. We're, and, and, and that sort of way of being in the world and of like feeling like too much and like just like la la la la la la la, I have to get it all in here. Um, you know, we interrupt each other and we're like, oh, we're doing really well right now, by the way.

Um, but somehow that part of my brain is what my poems are. And your books, somehow... I want some sort of filter, not filter, but like a, like a sieve. And I don't, I, I, you know, I always wish, like, why, why didn't I write *Bluets*? Right. You know, why didn't I write, you know, what's that Jenny Ophel book? Uh,

LAUREL SNYDER: the museum, I'm gonna get it wrong, is it *Museum of Accidents*?

RACHEL ZUCKER: No, that's my book!

LAUREL SNYDER: Oh my god!

RACHEL ZUCKER: *Department of Speculation*. It's similar! Right! I'm just like, wait, I, I, I sort of write but it's not, it doesn't come out like that. Everything, like, I don't know, I, I, I...

LAUREL SNYDER: It's interesting, so I'm having a couple of responses to this and one is, So, I work really hard at that. Maybe the way that you do your meditation practice or your morning pages, I do revision.

Uh huh. Like, I have one mantra, like, only one mantra. There's one thing framed above my desk that Thisbe Nissen sort of sent me years ago that she kept above her desk that I keep above my desk. And it is an Isaac Babel quote that says, "your

language becomes clear and true not when you can no longer add, but when you can no longer take away.”

And that is, like, the one thing. And I hit this so hard with my students. Like, the goal is to winnow, always.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, and I am totally a maximalist.

LAUREL SNYDER: I know, and, and I am in every other aspect of my life. But for whatever reason, I read, I don't know, like I read too much Creeley in college or something. Like, I, I am always trying to take away, in a very conscious, it doesn't feel natural to me.

It's, it's like, it is stripping out, stripping out. When I write fiction, when I write prose, everything has too many clauses and my editor is always coming through and being like you can have one of these three ways of describing the hat, you know, like that like in fiction, it's like once I open the doors to fiction like it floods out and it becomes longer and longer, but in but in the picture books, which I still think of as poems, it has like it's about winnowing.

RACHEL ZUCKER: So why do you tolerate my aesthetics?

LAUREL SNYDER: Because I love to read all kinds of things and I don't think I mean I think *Fables* and *Pedestrians* was more discreet.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, well, *Fables* was supposed to be published, you know, I wanted it to be published as its own book and not as poetry. Right. You know, but then wave liked it. Right. And I sort of I was like, whatever.

I don't know.

LAUREL SNYDER: I think you have that part of your brain too. I think I don't know. I love your work I mean, I just love your work. It's expansive and thought like in thinky and but like visceral and human at the same time that it's thinki And it is that it is match maximalist. It's like you're throwing your full self into it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I'm really sick of it.

LAUREL SNYDER: Yeah, you're, well, I hear that.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, I'm done with that.

LAUREL SNYDER: You should write a poem about - [laughter]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, okay, so all right, so I'm sick of that and I really I want to I want to write something that is going to give people pleasure and that is going to...

[1:05:05]

LAUREL SNYDER: Maybe it's partly this though. You write about yourself. You're your own subject. Yeah. And it would might, maybe it would feel uncomfortable or wrong to try, like, in the same way that we're talking about the sort of messy extra factor, right? If what you're trying to put on the page is a representation of Rachel, it would feel untrue if it ended up feeling like some, like, stark, minimalist, translated thing. Right? Like, that wouldn't feel like Rachel. Though that's in Rachel, that wouldn't feel like you were bringing yourself to the page.

When I write a picture book, I am not my own subject. Ever. When I write a poem, and, and the same thing happens, I don't know, like, the couple of times in the last few years where I've written an actual poem, some of which I've showed you, they're, they're exactly, I mean, they don't sound like your poems, but they are messy and full of me and nostalgia and self criticism and thinky stuff and big description and they go on and on longer than I feel like they should.

A picture book centers the child, and I think the thing that makes children's book writing different in, more than any other, is that we are not focused on ourselves, we are focused on literacy and creating a world for children. And so the world of children's book writing is a world of agents and editors and authors and illustrators but also and all the people who work in publishing house, and also librarians and

teachers and parents and grandparents and there is this sense that like I, when I'm writing I'm thinking about what I want to say.

When I write a poem, I'm just thinking about what I want to say. When I am writing a picture book, I am thinking about what a four year old can hear. So that is like inherently, you know, like that is a, like an erasure process almost, right? Like it's a translation. I am taking, if I want to, if I want to write a picture book about this conversation, and I'm thinking about a four year old or a six year old or a ten year old, I have to translate this conversation into not just words they will know, but like the metaphors that will make sense and how much attention they have and what kinds of books they may already have read and what pictures make sense in their lives.

And I always want to bring, if you read my picture books, you will find that like, they have words like, like the *Inside the Slidy Diner* is the word nefarious in it, right? Like that, that I want to bring them words and images and ideas they haven't already encountered. Always. That's the part that feels experimental or innovative, but I, but I have to do it... It's like, it's like sneaking a green bean into the smoothie or something, right? Like I'm, I'm bringing children something they can see. Mm hmm. And I think that is very different than when you write a poem. And this brings us back to the audience conversation, right? Like, and this is why I don't like to talk about market, and I, but I *do* like to talk about reader.

That like the audience for the book matters deeply because like in like human physical development ways, they just are in a different place than an adult reader.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. And that, and, and one of the things that feels safe and, like, incredibly generative to me in talking to you about craft, is that you're one of the few people that I feel like I can talk to about my desire for an audience and my appreciation of audience and, and this is something I say in my classes, I talk about the difference between storytelling and theater, and you know, storytelling, you acknowledge the audience is present. It is a community, communal experience that is about literacy, that is about teaching people who they are, you know, what to think, how to act, what to be careful of. Like, it is vital.

Storytelling is vital. Theater, I'm not saying theater is bad, and I'm getting more and more interested in theater as I get older, but this thing you do where you pretend the audience is not there.

LAUREL SNYDER: Correct. Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's really interesting.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And it's like this voyeuristic thing. I feel like so when I was at Iowa and since so much and this is where we get into the like the difference between spoken word and you know, the like all this kind of cause I'm not really a spoken word poet, but I am not a theater poet either.

And even on the page, I'm just not, I am thinking about, I, it's not that I'm thinking about a reader. There's something this this like weird like poetry is like overheard, and we're gonna pretend that there's no audience like this [01:10:00] drives me bananas.

LAUREL SNYDER: No, it drives me crazy.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And I want a general reader.

[1:10:06]

LAUREL SNYDER: I think there's this fear that if you respect the reader, you are pandering in some way.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right.

LAUREL SNYDER: And that's just not the same thing. And the difference is intention, right? Like, that like, I am thinking about, and I am always thinking about one reader, and that reader is myself, but the reader that I am thinking about is eight or six or ten, right?

I am writing for Laurel Snyder, but I'm writing for Laurel Snyder at a very different point in my life. In order to get back to her and understand her and imagine her, I

have to do these deep nostalgia dives, but I also have to spend a lot of time with a five year old. Because I don't really remember what it feels like to be five.

I think I do. I have snapshots. And then I have to sort of check in with the kids who can bring her back to me in order to then speak a language that will actually serve the readership more generally. It's, it, it, it's, it's, I, I've spent a lot of time over the years trying to figure this out, like, because I know a lot of people who think a lot about the readership, and they do, like, a friend of mine was just saying the other day that she's been surveying kids because she's got this, amazing series that's going to be coming out.

Um, but she really wanted to check in with like early chapter book or chapter book age readers. And so she'd been doing all that. And I was just like, I can't like the minute I do that, I lose the, the discreet, like I lose the self. I lose the, the individual voice that I have that I, that I want to speak.

I am speaking for and to myself as a child. I am having to sometimes use other people's language, but again, like, in a much vaguer, like, I like to hang out in a preschool for a few hours because strange syntactical things happen, and words get mispronounced or misunderstood, or, like, it's, or, sometimes, I, this sounds absurd, but, like, sometimes I spend time in my house when I'm alone, like, sitting under the dining room table with the, the dining room table cloth over it, or, like, in the middle of a staircase, I will just, because I want to grasp the feeling of being a child.

That's been the greatest permission of this career has been permission to not grow up, like permission... it is in the same way that like i'm allowed to like eat ice cream and write it off on my taxes if i'm writing an ice cream book, right [laughs]? Like i'm allowed to sit under the dining room table and not be a crazy person because i'm writing about a kid who's sitting under the dining room table.

And I have to remember where the dust falls on my nose and what it feels like to you know creep under the tablecloth and have it brush my hair or have the cat join me, um that checking in with myself *is* how I respect the reader. But it's different than wanting to express the self.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right, right. Okay, so you said earlier on, and I've been hearing you say this in the past day, that you want to get back to something. So what's, what, what is, say more about that. Like, where do, where are you?

LAUREL SNYDER: So I actually, I did a talk. I, I was supposed to do a talk, a Zoom talk during the pandemic about world building.

And this is one of my, my current chip on the shoulder always is that I teach a, like, I teach a field that I didn't actually study and don't. So I'm, I'm perpetually having to learn the craft of fiction. Fiction is very hard for me. Um, I love working on picture books because I feel like I get to use my poet brain, but I got asked to do this world building talk in the middle of the pandemic when I was making no money and I was looking for any pennies I could find.

And I said, yes, and I signed the contract and then the world just got worse and worse. And by the time it was time to kind of give this talk, I realized I felt like it was bad. Like it felt cruel to bring any kind of critical demands, or sort of, like, expectations to a bunch of people who are, it was from, it was for SCBWI, which is a children's book world sort of organization for, like, aspiring authors.

I was like, the last thing I want to do is go to a bunch of people who are struggling to publish and be like, work harder, do more. And so I wrote this craft talk instead. I wrote to the people and I said, can I change the subject? And they said yes. And so I ended up doing this hour long talk called "The Craft of Daydreams."

Which is effectively meditation [laughs], but like that basically what I it was like it was like how to use like walking how to use sleep, how to use like sort of play like I spent a lot of time working in my dollhouse like, in the pandemic like playing with my dollhouse and then sort of started out of that writing what I hope will be the next book I write about a little girl in a dollhouse.

Essentially, I realized that, and I think the pandemic really assisted me in this, this realization of like when the world goes away and you're not on tour and you're not meeting with your agent and you're not, you know, and you're locked in your house and your garden and taking walks in the evening, and my family and I, we started

doing these midnight walks where we would walk down to this Creek near our house at midnight 'cause that was when no one was out because we were being so careful about the.

And so I wrote this whole lecture that was basically like how to, how to use all of these things. Essentially that I realized was like, Oh, I'm basically writing a lecture of like what my best friend Susan and I did when we were eight years old.

[1:15:08]

And I just feel like that's become my main focus right now of like in a world where obviously I still need to make a living, but I want my books to be, I don't ever want to repeat myself. It feels like the child brain is the part that knows how to learn new things and think about things in new ways.

And so, while it's also true that when I read a beautiful book that is different than a book that I have been reading, like, it also wakes something up in me. Um, poetry does that, not... all sorts of things. Movies do, I mean, all sorts of things. Music does that. But I feel like for me the most important one, and because I write for children it makes sense to, to just really, really, essentially regress. Um, to get back to that place that discovers and fails and does, you know, a messy sloppy job at stuff.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, it's just so interesting cause you have or have not read *The Artist's Way*.

LAUREL SNYDER: I haven't.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. I mean it. So there's, there's two main practices that you're supposed to do every day you wake up and you do morning pages and it's, you just write three pages.

It's not an amount of time. And I have, I've been really clear with myself and with, um, my students or, you know, the people in the group that I'm facilitating, don't re-read them. Don't mind them. Don't go back to them. They are wasted. We have

to get back to, you know, and it's really like Julia Cameron who wrote the book, she really, she, she sees all people as blocked creatives who are in recovery.

LAUREL SNYDER: Yes hundred percent. That's exactly what I believe.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And then every week you're supposed to go on an artist's date. You take yourself on an artist's date and it's, you, you do it alone. And the thing that people misunderstand is that like first they're like, oh, okay, I guess I have to go to a museum.

No, the artist's date is to basically be alone, to be with yourself. But to do something that you've found to regress. To, to do something that you found pleasurable as a child or that you would find pleasurable now. So for some people, it is, maybe it's going to a museum, but for, for most people, it is not going to a museum.

It's like sitting under the table. It's lying down and doing nothing. It's watching too much TV. It's, but not in the way that we watch TV to distract ourselves.

LAUREL SNYDER: So I have this manuscript that, um, will be out in a few years. That we need an artist for it that doesn't actually have a title right now. It was originally called *Work and Play*, but it's about, it's a series, it actually is sort of based on Matthea Harvey's *Swivel Lines*. It's the idea is you have a spread and, so like the first spread, I don't, I'm not going to try to remember the text, but the first, and it's, it's not rhyming, but it's, it's sort of metered. The, the first page is a ballerina dancing. Like, do you see the ballerina dancing?

And then it says, it says like, she does, she does this so that, and then you turn the page and it says, and then, and it shows her fishing, like sort of, she's dancing so that she can fish. But then on the other side of the fishing page is a man swimming, and it's like, and this guy is swimming, and then you turn the page and it's like, and you see him in his restaurant the next day.

And the whole idea is like, everybody contains multitudes. And, and some of those multitudes we call work, and some of those multitudes we call, like, some of those

identities are working identities, and some of them are playing identities. But there's this, this other thing, which is sort of, when we are mindful in our activities, in our movements, in our behaviors, it's really hard to sort out.

Like, the, the person who likes to, who dances for a living and likes to fish, but, but there might very well be somebody who fishes for a living and loves to dance, right? But I, I find that the idea of just like physical activity of moving through the world really interesting. And I think it's this, I mean, I think it's the same exact sort of thing, right?

That like, we're trying to see the moment we're in differently and kind of defamiliarize it -

RACHEL ZUCKER: And play, you know, how do we play and, and not an exact, I think you're right. Like, I mean, there's all different ways that we get blocked. As creatives, you know, or...

LAUREL SNYDER: Yeah, but I, I, I, I feel like I didn't fully explain

RACHEL ZUCKER: Go ahead.

LAUREL SNYDER: The problem is we're in this mode now of play and work where... Where work is the hard thing and play is recovery. Yeah. And play is usually consumption.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That's right. Right? And usually passive.

LAUREL SNYDER: Correct. Right, so to me television watching doesn't fit that model. Not because there's not a way to meaningfully watch television, but because I have now progred like I can only watch so I, I, I'm a terrible Bravo reality TV junkie.

I can watch eight hours of Vanderpump Rules. Mm hmm. And... I can drink a lot of wine, and I can take a bubble bath.

[1:20:01]

Like, these are the things that I do when, like, the day has been too much, right? And I really want to get out. I think this is a big part of it. I haven't said this out loud before, but, like, I want to get out of this mode where it's like, these are the things that I do that are unpleasant that I have to do, and these are the ways I recover by completely crashing and consuming.

And I'm not somebody who's into meditation and yoga and, like, all that kind of stuff, but I want to find those third things, or, or redefine the work and the work and play I do so that they feel more...

RACHEL ZUCKER: Well, your garden seems like a third thing. The dollhouse seems like a third thing. Um, I think the conversations between us, even though they're not alone, you know, they, they feel like a third thing. They, I mean, they really feel like they're neither work nor play. Right. Um, they are creative.

LAUREL SNYDER: But the writing, and I think we share this, now feels like work.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yes.

LAUREL SNYDER: And I want... That's what I'm trying to say. When I sit under the dining room table, when I take a walk at midnight, what I'm trying to find is the, is the child brain that remem, like, it used to be, one of my illustrators, Emily Hughes said this, the woman that does the *Charlie and Mouse* books, was saying she has to write with a pencil.

It's a tactile experience that she has. that reminds her of what it felt like to be a kid, because when you were a kid, you had to get things out, which is different than getting things down, right? I want to get back to the brain that gets things out, and away from the part of me that treats this as work.

And I've had to do this multiple times. I wrote *Orphan Island*, which is a novel that I had that came out a bunch of years ago, out of a moment just like this, where I

had gotten to a place where I couldn't do it anymore, and I didn't want to do it if it was going to feel like work. I'd rather, just, I'd rather go do other, I'd rather work in a coffee shop, I'd rather do, I'm a really good waitress, I did that for 15 years, like, I'd rather do other kinds of work than turn the thing that I love into labor in that, in that, I love labor, but like, into that, into that kind of work, and, and *Orphan Island* came out, I wrote *Orphan Island* entirely longhand, having told my agent, *I think I'm done. I'm never going to write another book again, but if I do, it's going to be something just for me.* But I feel like I have this cycle where like every five or 10, whatever it is years, I have to get back to that eight year old self.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. And, and, and meditation for me, which is a sort of relatively new thing, really works for me because it's not like watching television. Although I, since I've begun to really meditate seriously or playfully, I really should say, um, you know, regularly. When I watch television, it's different. It's not mindless in the same way. It's, but it is, it does feel more playful. I mean, you know, I love television.

Not reality television, but -

LAUREL SNYDER: Your television is better than my television.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I love television so much, but, but yeah, it's, there's something that happens for me. I mean, there's, there's two things. One, it is totally unproductive. Mm hmm. And it's very hard for me to unlearn my addiction to having to do something to show for myself at the end of the day, you know, you and I both like talk so much about like, *Oh, and then I'm still in my pajamas and I watched this.*

LAUREL SNYDER: Yeah, but I'm really still in my pajama.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, like, you know what you say that, but you've published 30 books and, and I'm just saying, both of us are extremely [dog barks in the background] Shush. Both of us are [laughs]

LAUREL SNYDER: Ginsberg's like, it's done. We're done. Lay down just for a minute.

RACHEL ZUCKER: We're almost done. We maybe should finish soon. Yeah. Okay. So I think, you know, we both are, whatever we like to think about ourselves, we are very productive people. We've done a lot of stuff and we, we each have different ways of trying to, you know, CA Conrad was like, *don't turn yourself into a factory*.

Right. You know, and I think that that's been, I, I am a hard worker and I love being a hard worker. There's something about meditation and the practice of regularly sitting down and trying not to think about, figure something out. Yeah. You know, and doing something with my brain that's just -

LAUREL SNYDER: I think, I don't think it's that I'm, I don't think it's that we're different. I think that my timeline is different than yours. I really do, particularly when I finish a novel, when I finish a novel, there is usually like a two or three month window where I accomplish almost nothing. And I really do, like, it'll be like three o'clock and I know the kids are going to be home from school soon and they'll say like jump up to take a shower because I've literally been watching like old West Wing episodes all day.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But I feel like that's what I do too. I, I can't go back and, I mean, there, yes, I can be like, okay, that weekend was when I went to blah, blah, blah. And I wrote for like 12 hours a day. But other than that, I don't know when I wrote these books.

[1:25:14]

LAUREL SNYDER: No. And I have the same thing. I think for me, the main, the main thing about work is I know the reason I will not ever stop is, I know that I am not well when I don't make work. It doesn't have to be writing. If I found another project that, in the same way that the garden consumed me during the lockdown year, like, if I found another project that consumed me and where I felt like at the end of the day, I had done something, I could stop writing.

It's just that I've never found that other thing. Besides parenting. I mean, that was the thing, is like, spending all day with my kids did feel like something. Writing feels like something, and interacting with humans feels like something. So I could open a coffee shop or a bar and run the coffee shop or bar, and I think I'd probably be fine.

The problem for me is that just to sit around with no, no labor, ultimately leads to me being in a really dark place. And I know that. Um, so I think it's, it's just like some people have to work out. Some people, you know, have to run 10 miles a day. And if, if at the end of the day, I, somebody says, what did you do today? I can't say something, I just, it's, it's not that they're judgment. It's just I, I just feel awful.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. We have two choices. We can take the dog across the street for yappy hour and then we can come back and record for like another 15, 20 minutes about anything that we forgot. We can end right now. What I love about what we did do was that it wasn't what I expected, which seems exactly right to be part of what I wanted to have, to share with listeners was, this is what it feels like to talk to you on the phone and yeah that relationship has been utterly sustaining for my creative process and my creative work and all of my books and so yeah, I thank you in my books, but like nobody really knows what that means and I feel like it's, like, if people want to know, like, the secret or the trick or the whatever, I would say, like, everybody needs a Laurel Snyder [laughs].

Like, and, and I, and I don't, and I think that you're not primarily a poet, that you don't live in the same place as me, even though I miss you so much, and I want to spend time with you. Like, there are all these factors of difference and similarity, that somehow, I don't know, like, like, and that it's out, it's also, we, we never were in school together.

LAUREL SNYDER: I, here's what I think. I think no matter what we, I'm really glad we did this. I am glad that we had some conversations, or said some things we maybe haven't quite said before. I, I think that there's no way this podcast, this is why we were both nervous. There's no way this, this episode can capture the thing that it, it actually is trying to capture.

So I think maybe it's better to say, let's end it. And just say like, this is... it's an inadequate representation, but like, but a representation. And the other thing I'll say is, and I, this is because I got to throw them in everywhere. Um, I'm a little obsessed with Jason Isbell, the, uh, the singer songwriter. And he was this Isbell recently said, yeah, that, um, when he goes into record a song for the first time, they never practice it before they go into do the recording session because he said, *you can only play a song once*.

Like first, you can only play a song the first time once and so what you're trying to capture is not a rehearsed... like the the when you go to play a live show you're playing a song you've played a million times before but that a recording he thinks should be capturing the discovery of something like, like figuring it out. I think if we walk to the park and we come back in 15 minutes we will have thought about what we're going to say for the next 15 minutes.

You know what I mean? Like, I don't want to practice it. So let's just leave it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I love you so much.

LAUREL SNYDER: I love you so much.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay, let's start.

[Laurel Snyder song]

RACHEL ZUCKER: This has been episode 118 with Laurel Snyder. Many thanks to Chronicle Books, Walden Pond Books, and all the publishers who send me and Commonplace patrons amazing books. Thank you to Laurel Snyder, Christine Larusso, and Leigh Sugar. Thank you to all our Commonplace patrons. You make Commonplace possible.

Thank you to folks who've signed up for Commonplace school classes. Thank you to each and every one of you who sends messages of support and encouragement. And always, always, thank you, listener. Thank you for listening.

[1:30:08]

[Laurel Snyder song]

Blooper

LAUREL SNYDER: [Car beeping] This is the thing that I say often.... Dammit... this is the thing... [laughs]... this is the thing that I say [laughs]...