**Podcast: Literaticast**

**Episode: 52: So… What’d We Miss? With Book Expert Alison Morris**

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[00:00:00] Literaticast theme music plays.

Jenn: [00:00:06] Hello and welcome to the Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran and I'm a senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency where I represent kids’ books, from picture books through YA and everything in between.

 [00:00:16] And on this podcast, I like to get my friends together and chat to give you a behind the scenes glimpse of the world of children's book publishing a couple of orders of business before we get on with the show. First, Literaticast has a Patreon. Throw in $1 a month and help support the podcast. I couldn't keep doing it without your help. And if you like the show, please review it on Apple Podcasts or talk it up on social media or whatever. More reviews help more people find us. Also, all the books we're going to talk about today will be on the show notes of the podcast, which live on my website, JenniferLaughran.com/literaticast.

 [00:00:53] And if you purchase books through Bookshop.org, at the affiliate links provided, a few pennies for each purchase also go to support the show. So thank you in advance for that. But also you could take that list and shop at your favorite independent bookstore or wherever you get books.

 [00:01:09] This year has been something else hasn't it? I feel both as if it has gone by in the blink of an eye and also that it has lasted 10,000 years. And also that time itself has lost all meaning. I suspect a lot of you can relate to that. Because this is sort of been the season That Time Forgot, here's also a lot of books that we probably all missed when they came out. We're going to talk about some of them today, as well as give some award predictions and a whole lot more. Plus, the best gift you can give this year to yourself or to a kid in your life, is a great book. And even better gift is to give books to kids who don't already have them. So we're going to talk about that a bit as well.

 [00:01:51] My guest today is Alison Morris. You'll know her if you listen to my friends, Grace and Alvina on their Book Friends Forever podcast, which you definitely should, because she is the voice of book recommendations on that show. But she wears other hats too, like being in charge of title selection at the nonprofit FirstBook. Alison is so good at giving book recommendations that I've commandeered her for this episode. So get your pens and papers ready for some awesome books you might have missed. Let me see if I can get Alison on the line.

 Hi, Alison.

Alison: [00:02:24] Hi, Jenn. How are you?

Jenn: [00:02:26] I'm good. So I introduced you before you got on the line. But could you do me the favor of introducing yourself?

Alison: [00:02:32] Sure. I am Alison Morris. And my official working title is Senior Director of Title Selection for FirstBook. And I also wear other additional hats outside that I do title recommendations for Book Friends Forever, which is the podcast of Grace Lin and Alvina Ling. And I am the unnamed editor on a lot of books by Gareth Hines because he is my husband and I do a lot of sort of at home publicity and editorial stuff for him. And yeah, that's kind of me in a nutshell, workwise.

Jenn: [00:03:07] Nice. So listeners will know that Grace and Alvina are friends of the podcast and I've been guests on my podcast, and I've been guest on their podcast. And also Gareth was a guest last month. So we're all pals.

Alison: [00:03:19] Yeah, I looked over the roster of people you've had on recently. And I was like, oh my gosh, look at all these friends of mine. So.

Jenn: [00:03:26] You're one of those lovely people that I think of as a connector. You seem to be everywhere and know everyone in the world kids’ books. Can we get—

Alison: [00:03:34] It's funny because I do actually get that a lot.

Jenn: [00:03:38] You're literally everywhere. So can we get a brief nutshell version of your kids book origin story, like, how did you end up here?

Alison: [00:03:47] Sure. So I mean, to go back in time, just a few years. I went to Smith College as an undergrad and went to school knowing I wanted to do something related to education and thought maybe it would be Children's Television Workshop. Sort of designing children's programming for public television. I wasn't sure what, but I ended up majoring in education and studying child development. So I spent four years sort of immersed in thinking about kids and how they work and how they develop and did my teaching certification, elementary certification, as part of that, but came out of that experience thinking TV isn't really where I want to be. And I'm not sure I want to be in a traditional classroom every day, because I have so much respect for, and anxiety about what happens in classrooms every day and the amount of pressure that is put on classroom teachers.

 [00:04:30] So long story short, I moved to Indianapolis for an internship at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, which was amazing, but I fell really in love when I got a part time job working at Kids Ink Bookstore, which is an amazing independent bookstore run by Shirley Mullen in Indianapolis. And I found my calling. I was like, this is what I want to do. I loved it when educators came in, teachers came in looking for books, you know, saying, I have a second grader reading at an eighth grade level, what can you recommend? Or the opposite. I have an eighth grader reading at the second grade level. What can we find that's going to motivate them as a reader but not insult them?

 [00:05:01] And so I fell in love with book selling. And from there, I went to the Dartmouth bookstore, I got a job as a co children's book buyer, which was a pretty remarkable thing to find a year out of having graduated. And I was there a year and a half before I got a position at Wellesley Booksmith, which is now called Wellesley Books, but was then Booksmith. And I wound up there for 10 years as their children's book buyer. I built up our children's section from a tiny corner of the store to what became 50% of our stores unit sales in a given year. And by the time I left, we were doing 75 children's author events a year.

 [00:05:34] And so I also, part of all my connections in the book world, a lot of those stem from the time that I spent getting to know editors and publicists and authors and illustrators when they came through the store during that period of time, and going to conferences and things.

 [00:05:46] So then I went from that experience to wanting to figure out how to take what I was doing on a small local level and do it on a on a much bigger one. And I went to Scholastic Book Clubs, moved to New York, Gareth and I moved to New York for that. And I was there three years before this opportunity at FirstBook came up. And to me, it just spoke to who I really wanted to serve and what I most wanted to do from a mission perspective.

 [00:06:08] And so I moved, we moved to DC, and I have now been at FirstBook for the past eight years. My principal role there is choosing all the books that go on the FirstBook Marketplace. So I am still a children's book buyer. I have been a buyer for 20 years, I have read a, like I don't even know, phenomenal number of books in that time, but particularly picture books. But I have really just been immersed in this world of seeing what's coming out, understanding the landscape of what's happening in classrooms, obviously working with families and kids directly was sort of a big piece of my independent bookstore life. But now a lot of what I do is just thinking about what books are going into classrooms and how teachers are interacting with their students since educators are FirstBook’s primary audience.

Jenn: [00:06:49] Awesome. I mean, that's my background, too. I was a bookseller and a book buyer for many years. So—

Alison: [00:06:54] It's a sweet gig.

Jenn: [00:06:56] Yeah, it’s the perfect—

Alison: [00:06:57] But it is also a gig that, certainly on the store level, does not pay a whole lot. And so I think it's hard for people to figure out how they can do that long term. But tip of the hat to everyone who is in those roles out there, because it's also a really challenging job. And I think that I miss a lot by not actually physically putting books in people's hands on a regular basis the way that I used to. So that’s the down side.

Jenn: [00:07:20] Yeah. That’s why I still work in the bookstore on Sunday mornings, just so I can literally, well, first of all, so I can get the employee discount, but also so that I can actually interact with some kids and parents.

Alison: [00:07:35] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:07:34] Because it's really special to see physically what's coming out of the box? What do they look like on display? What are people gravitating to? And stuff like that.

Alison: [00:07:44] Absolutely.

Jenn: [00:07:43] I find it incredibly helpful in my job, too.

Alison: [00:07:46] I miss building book displays so much, too. So, I feel all of this Jenn.

Jenn: [00:07:51] Can you tell us a bit more about FirstBook, like what is their mission? And how do you do your job? I want to know so much more.

Alison: [00:07:59] Okay, absolutely. So, FirstBook is a nonprofit social enterprise. Been around for 30 years now. And we provide access to educational resources and things that are going to help students do better and succeed more and have more opportunities, because our focus is really on educational equity, wanting to build out opportunities for kids to have the same kinds of benefits as their more affluent peers.

 [00:08:26] And we serve a network all over the country of educators. And there are, currently we have 525,000 registered members who interact with us on different levels at different times. But they are all educators who work either in Title One schools, or Title One eligible schools, or in programs that serve a high percentage of families in need. So that can be anything from hospital clinics to programs for incarcerated youth, Headstart, after school programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, sort of any touch points you can think of, or programs and services that exist in low income communities, we tend to have connections to those or members who are working in those kinds of settings.

 [00:09:00] We've distributed more than 200 million books and resources to date. And we estimate that we reach about 5 million children annually through the resources we provide. So the bulk of what we're doing is getting books out the door. I have an amazing colleague, Melissa Elgersma, who buys our non-book items because we do carry some classroom and program supplies and make those available to our members. And that includes basic hygiene kits, select clothing items, adaptive learning games, sports equipment, things that we know our members are really needing. And our goal is always to try to provide those at the best possible pricing to them.

 [00:09:34] And we also provide our members with toolkits and downloadable resources and videos on different themes that sort of come up as things that are particular needs of theirs, or with our partners, if they have particular needs to disseminate information that we want to be sure our members get. We have some tools that allow us to do that for them. That has generated some really meaningful resource material for educators to use, just sort of extend just beyond the books and the work that we're doing in the classroom.

 [00:10:01] But the books are really, they're the central part of what we do. And that is my world at FirstBook and outside FirstBook. So the FirstBook Marketplace, which you can visit at FirstBookMarketplace.org, is the platform through which we get materials out to our members.

 [00:10:18] I don't know if you've, Jenn, had any time to spend on it or are aware of it.

Jenn: [00:10:21] I have.

Alison: [00:10:22] Yes. So that is that's our e-commerce site. And members, once an educator is registered with us, they can go onto that site at any time during the year and purchase books for their classroom. And they also can receive credits or grants from us to go onto the site and choose whatever they want. It's one of my favorite things. And one of the things that’s most unique about us is we have this curated site, we're adding new content all the time that we're curating from publishers’, front lists, and back lists and reminders list. But members can go on at any time and select books that they think are going to have the most impact and most meet the needs of their own students. And that element of choice is, to me, really important.

 [00:11:01] I'm grateful for literacy programs that, do the hard work of curating these book sets and sending them out for educators to use that help accomplish goals or meet benchmarks, align with curriculum. But there's also just a need for educators to find other books throughout the year that are going to really speak to their students and engage them as readers, or further their own knowledge as educators as well. And we are able to provide that. And our corporate partners will do things like fund grants or codes against a specific section that of meaning to them and of interest to our members.

 [00:11:32] So like STEM is a popular one. And so our members will get an email that's like here, take an additional 30% off all of the books in our STEM sections, or use this code to take an additional X percent off all of the books that we have by African American authors and illustrators. Because we are very focused on understanding the ways that educators are using books and coming to us looking for books and being sure that we are representing the broad diversity of experiences and diversity of kids that we are serving. And so we have very thoughtfully curated diversity and inclusion sections that align with people's desire to shop by windows and mirrors, which is also really cool.

Jenn: [00:12:08] Yeah. How do you choose the books? Is it like being a bookstore buyer?

Alison: [00:12:13] It is like being a bookstore buyer. In many respects, in order to get our prices as low as we can, we buy on a non returnable basis, we are typically buying a very high volume, increasingly high volume, but we buy through a special sales department, which is different from a traditional sales division. So I don't have sales reps who call on me in the same fashion that I did as an indie bookseller. So that element of it is different. It's a little bit unusual to be a literacy nonprofit, or educational nonprofit that is buying at the volume we are and across as many titles as we are. And so we're kind of a strange beast as accounts go. We're just we're just operating on a very, very different scale.

 [00:12:52] Instead of having reps call on me, I have to just sort of set my own schedule and go through catalogs and read frontlist and confer with—my immediate team is just two of us right now. We are growing, which I'm very excited about. But I have an amazing person, Jack Pando, who reports to me, and then incredible colleagues on our merchandising team, who is sort of the adjacent team. And we refer to ourselves often as the book nerds in house. And we have really in the weeds conversations about authenticity and representation and the language that we're using on the marketplace, wanting to be sure that we are being as affirming of everyone's experiences as we can be.

 [00:13:33] And that crew are the ones I will also go to and be like, hey, I'm really having a hard time choosing between these or this doesn't sit right with me, would someone else read this? And then we have other, I have other people I will turn to out of house as well for insights and input. But honestly, it gets harder and harder to do my job. Because there are more and more books that are relevant to the kinds of experiences we've been curating for years, which is awesome. Like, I’m thrilled that it's so hard to do my job right now.

Jenn: [00:13:59] It’s a good problem.

Alison: [00:14:02] Yeah, it's tricky. I'm so cautious not even to call the problem. And I know that’s not what you mean, but like, it's because it's not a problem. But it is a challenge. Because I have never wanted to buy as many books as I do right now. And it you know, it's like, you have to tell yourself as a buyer for any store, I am not the only book outlet, right? Like FirstBook is not the only place people can find books, if I don't acquire this title, they can find it elsewhere. And it also doesn't mean we won't carry it at some other point in time. But one of the things I have to be very mindful of is price. And prices have been going up. Hardcover prices are quite high now. When I think about the families we serve and how many of them have just $20 to spend on a picture book. I mean, that's impossible. So most of the books on our site we buy at a deep discount, we add a small margin that covers our operating costs and shipping to our members, and then the books go up on our site typically at around 65% off retail. But the percentage of retail can range from 50% to 90% off retail, because we also, on our team we're trying to think of about feeding sort of both ends of our members. The ones who maybe have a budget, a small budget, but their schools do allocate some money for them to spend on books. So maybe they can afford to get hard covers.

 [00:15:14] And then we have a ton of members. I mean, a super high percentage of our members are using their own pocket money to buy books for their kids, which I can't even tell you how much this breaks my heart. But it happens all the time. And I'm very mindful of wanting to be sure we can provide them with really good stuff but at the lowest pricing, so we do source books from remainders for that purpose, and buy from publishers’ overstock lists, and we're sort of kind of a couple times a year, three, four times a year trying to like replenish that sort of lowest cost inventory.

 [00:15:41] We also do some custom print runs on a large scale for select titles, sometimes with the help of our corporate partners. So Pizza Hut, for example, funded us creating five, I'm gonna use the term #OwnVoices here. I know there are many ways in which it's problematic. In this context, it is accurate to these books, five #OwnVoices picture books we did last year, and another five we did this year. And that has been amazing. So these are print runs between 15 and 25,000 units. So we did like we did custom paperbacks of *Frybread*, *Drawn Together*, *Alma*, that was just last year, and two others and we have five more that just launched on the marketplace last week, actually. And those are $3.65 on our site, I believe, compared to, you know, probably $17.99 For most of those at retail. And that is something that we're hoping we can sort of expand upon and do more of.

 [00:16:33] But I will also say that I'm starting to see publishers bring more of their backlist and more of their diverse frontlist into paperback, which for picture books for a long time has been a huge problem. And so it's exciting that we don't necessarily have to go in that deep because we don't have the funds to just do that on a massive scale at this point in time. So yeah, yeah, so it's a lot of just thinking about, alright, do we have the books that we think our members are gonna be the most excited about right now that are coming out brand new? And do we have the books that are high quality, but also are for the people who just really don't have any money to spend?

 [00:17:12] And I haven't even mentioned we also, FirstBook, the way we started out was just in taking publisher donations. And that's still a huge piece of what we do and something we are forever wanting more of. Publishers donate books to us, in full carton quantity and those go up on the Book Bank section of the marketplace. So our members check it regularly. They can go on at any time, see what's been donated, and then they can buy a full, I'm saying buy. They can receive a full carton of books from us. And I say they're not really buying because those books are free to us but they do have to cover the cost of shipping. And so whenever possible, we also offer codes to them, funded by corporate partners, or via donors to make those completely free so they can go on, choose the cartons they want, and then those just get shipped right to their doorstep.

 [00:17:57] And a lot of those are books that they use to distribute to families at feeding sites, for example, or at family engagement nights, different activities that they're doing in their community. We also have partners who will fund truckloads of books or pallets of books being distributed at their schools and programs. So whenever possible, we're just trying to get books out into the universe. Yeah.

Jenn: [00:18:19] Which leads us to I know that FirstBook has a goal of giving a million brand new books to underserved kids this holiday season.

Alison: [00:18:26] Yes, we do.

Jenn: [00:18:29] So it seems that $1 equals one book. So if you're listening in December, 2021, I've started a fundraiser for FirstBook for listeners of this podcast. I'll have a link to donate in the show notes on my website. And I will match whatever listeners donate up to $1,000. So please donate.

Alison: [00:18:45] Jenn, that is incredibly generous. Thank you. We, on behalf of everyone at FirstBook, that means a huge amount. So thank you so much for that.

Jenn: [00:18:53] Of course, I love it. I personally always suggest bookish donations in lieu of gifts for those people that you might find hard to shop for. For example, I have a lot of colleagues and clients. So I always do a donation instead of giving them individual small presents that, you know, it wouldn't be all that great if I spent $1,000 on a bunch of presents, they’re probably going to not… for like, hundreds of presents, they're gonna suck. And then I’ll have to ship them around and stuff like that.

Alison: [00:19:22] Which is not gonna work this year, don't ship this year.

Jenn: [00:19:24] I would rather use that money to save the planet and do something better with it. So, if you, listener are looking for a present for the agent or editor in your life? I bet they would love it if you donated your FirstBook.

Alison: [00:19:38] Hooray, thank you. Thank you on behalf of everyone who donates in advance. And I’ll just mention, I mean, this is sort of implied but our name FirstBook comes from this notion that, and I mean, in a like shocking number of cases, the books that kids get through us are literally the first books they've ever owned. We hear it from our members all the time. So you're helping change that and give a kid their first book, and hopefully many more books after that, because we don't want them to have just one.

Jenn: [00:20:05] Yeah.

 [00:20:05] So now let's talk books. I wanted to get you here, not just to talk about worthy charities and the like, but also, because you know everything about books. This time of year, there's so much hubbub about certain books, there's all these lists and everything. Best of this, best of that, and they get all the spotlight. But particularly in pandemic time, I feel like a lot of books slipped through the cracks. And I want to shine a little light on some titles that came out since this all started that might not have gotten as much love or as much time in the sun as we'd like. I hope that listeners will go back and revisit these older titles that you might have missed and I'm going to have links to all of them in the show notes. But Alison, are you willing to give me some pandemic time releases that you think we might have missed? And I have a few, too.

Alison: [00:20:51] Absolutely.

Jenn: [00:20:52] Okay.

Alison: [00:20:52] Absolutely. And I will also say that I'm probably going to mention some that may have gotten more buzz, like sometimes it's even hard for me to know who's hearing what.

Jenn: [00:21:01] Right.

Alison: [00:21:01] Anyway, well, I'll mention those. I’ll mention that as we go.

Jenn: [00:21:04] Well, listen, I mean, the thing is that there's so many hundreds… hundreds? I don't know, thousands? I have no idea. A lot of books have been released in the past year and a half so—

Alison: [00:21:14] Oh, I can help with that.

Jenn: [00:21:17] We’re going to miss so many. Do you know how many books have been released?

Alison: [00:21:20] So I mean, I don't know an official number. But I can tell you that we buy from about 50 different publishers at FirstBook, some of those are now, like they're distributed by another publisher, so they… anyway. That is fewer distribution outlets, but specifically, probably somewhere close to 50 publishers. And I calculated that last year, I reviewed 10,000 titles in those publishers’ catalogs.

Jenn: [00:21:44] Oh my God. Yeah.

Alison: [00:21:47] In one year. That was in one year. There were I think 3500 on the spring catalogs that I reviewed. So yeah, it's a lot. If you're an author, just actually forget that I said that. Do not think about it, because it's actually—

Jenn: [00:22:03] I feel sick, truly.

Alison: [00:22:03] It’s not a good feeling, yeah. And those include licensed titles, those include paperback reissues like, it's just it's a lot. It's a lot.

Jenn: [00:22:12] Yeah. And there's no way… we would be talking for a year and a half.

Alison: [00:22:17] Yes.

Jenn: [00:22:17] If we had to talk about all of them. So we're gonna be very, we're just barely scratching the surface, but.

Alison: [00:22:23] I agree. I agree.

Jenn: [00:22:23] Let’s start with books for babies. What are your picks?

Alison: [00:22:27] So I just wanted to give a shout out. Again, I don't know how many people have seen them. But Grace Lin did this really delightful board book series with Charlesbridge that published a year ago. And they're all sort of early math related concept books for very young kids, babies and toddlers. And I think they're terrific. And they just show a wonderful diversity of kids engaging in very familiar kid-friendly activities. So there's one called *Circle! Sphere!* that has kids blowing bubbles, *The Last Marshmallow,* which is two kids drinking cocoa. *What Will Fit?* is an African American child fitting pumpkins and other things into a basket. And then there's another delightful one called *Up to My Knees!* and they're terrific. So I really just want to give a shout out to those because they've sort of made their way into my rotation of like standard new baby gifts as well.

Jenn: [00:23:14] Nice. Oh, I have a new baby gift book, too. One of my favorite baby books that came out during the pandemic, was my client, Erica Sirotich’s *Mail Duck*. Unfortunately, it came out in April 2020 and I think lots of folks missed it, but this is a board book with lift the flap and color and shape elements. It's totally adorable. It's about a duck mail carrier who visits his route and drops off cool packages to his little animal buddies. It has a fun surprise at the end. And literally every kid I've met that has seen this book adores it, one of my young friends even dressed as mail duck for Halloween.

Alison: [00:23:49] Nice.

Jenn: [00:23:49] This is a perfect book for the one to two year old in your life and it's a great gift. I put it in all my new baby packages now.

Alison: [00:23:57] I love that book. It's got such charming art. And I mean, what kid doesn't want to be a mail carrier, letter carrier? Imagine doing that door to door.

Jenn: [00:24:07] That's perfect.

Alison: [00:24:08] Shout out to Keith who's our letter carrier who I adore.

Jenn: [00:24:11] I will tell you a secret which is, Erica doesn't know that I'm saying this. We just signed up a second book.

Alison: [00:24:22] Nice that's exciting.

Jenn: [00:24:23] Which is about mail duck doesn't feel too good and mail quail has to take over.

Alison: [00:24:29] Mail quail. I love it.

Jenn: [00:24:33] It’s really cute. Okay, so is that it for board books?

Alison: [00:24:37] Also support the Postal Service because it needs us.

Jenn: [00:24:38] Yes, 100%.

Alison: [00:24:39] Oh, and that just… *The Lost Package*. That would be a great book to pair with *Mail Duck*. Do you know *The Lost Package*?

Jenn: [00:24:45] I don't know.

Alison: [00:24:47] By Richard Ho and Jessica Lanan. I believe that's right. I'm like, it's hard off the cuff sometimes. I'm like, searching for names.

Jenn: [00:24:55] It’s okay.

Alison: [00:24:55] Oh, it is a beautiful picture book that came out last year that is also about delivery, in this case a package but the mail we receive through the Postal Service and there is a beautiful letter in the back that is a note from the author from Richard explaining how important it was that his father was a postal carrier when he was growing up and how the security of that job really opened up opportunities. And had his parents not had the security of that job he might never have been born because it was only after his dad got that job that his parents felt like they could have a second child and he was that second child. It's a beautiful picture book about a kid mailing a package.

Jenn: [00:25:36] Nice. Well, there you go. Do you have any other picture book picks?

Alison: [00:25:40] Oh my god, I have so many.

Jenn: [00:25:42] Hit me.

Alison: [00:25:43] So I want to give a shout out to *The Midnight Fair*. I think this has been a really good year for wordless picture books. And this is one of the most magical, whimsical, just suck you in, picture books that I've seen. The art is incredible. The author is Gideon Sterer. And the illustrator, I apologize, I'm probably going to butcher this name, Mariachiara Di Giorgio. And it is a book about a bunch of woodland creatures who appear at a fairgrounds after dark and the humans have locked up for the evening. And the animals wind up going into the fair, and powering everything up and turning it all on and having their own sort of carnival in the woods at night.

 [00:26:27] And it's just, it's just the fantasy that as a kid, even as an adult, you just want to sink into and the illustrations are just breathtaking. And I just think it's a terrific gift book for people to keep in mind right now.

 [00:26:39] And I also, while we're on the wordless book topic, John Hare, H-A-R-E, his picture books are a delight and they're all kids taking a field trip somewhere deep. And last year was a publication *of Field Trip to the Ocean Deep* which is sort of like an Atlantis picture book story for kids that is just a joy. Those are two favorites that I love that don't have words.

 [00:27:00] One that I think most people probably have not seen, that does have words and it's just a charmer and a really upbeat delightful story is *The Electric Slide and Kai* by Kelly J. Baptist and illustrated by Darnell Johnson. And it's a picture book from Lee & Low about a kid who is the only member of his family who doesn't have a dance nickname. And it's his beloved grandfather who doles out these nicknames to each member of the family. And he really is hoping that at this upcoming family wedding, he will figure out and be awarded his own dance nickname, but dancing is not really what his strength is. It's just a really affirming joyful family story. And I just think it's a delight. So that’s *The Electric Slide and Kai*, spelled K-A-I.

Jenn: [00:27:43] Great.

Alison: [00:27:44] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:27:44] I will admit that I've never seen any of those books, so.

Alison: [00:27:46] Oh, hurray.

Jenn: [00:27:48] So I bet you have seen my pick because you've seen everything. But one of my faves from spring of this year, was Shawn Harris's *Have You Ever Seen a Flower?*

Alison: [00:28:00] Yes. It’s great.

Jenn: [00:28:00] Which I think is stunning and did not get enough attention. It's a really simple and spare text. It's like, have you ever seen a flower? I mean, really seen a flower? But I think you'll find that you haven't really seen a flower until you read this book. Because as simple as it is, is also totally profound. It's like when a kid says something wild sometimes and you're like, whoa. Are you some kind of prophet? What kid? Who are? What's inside of you that you just asked me that question? That kind of text. And the illustrations, are, I don't know of their crayons or pastels or what but the illustrator, Shawn Harris has done more with crayons than I could have ever thought of because they leap off the page. They are like neon, and they grab you by the eyeballs. It's absolutely glorious. I love this book.

Alison: [00:28:48] I love your description of it, Jenn. That's all very apt. And yes, absolutely. I think it's been an amazing year for picture books.

Jenn: [00:28:54] Oh my gosh.

Alison: [00:28:55] I also think it's been a really brave year for picture books. I feel like I've seen more content this year that is pushing at the boundaries of things we usually talk about with kids than I've ever seen before. And to me that truth is really exciting. There's, like *My Two Border Towns* by David Bowles and Erica Meza about being honest about families who are living at the border and the humanity of those families and a kid being friends with one of them.

 [00:29:18] And *Unbound: The Life and Art of Judith Scott*. That one’s Joyce Scott, Brie Spangler and Melissa Sweet illustrated that picture book. And that's about a girl who is separated from her… The author was separated from her sister when they were very young, her twin sister, because her sister had Down Syndrome and was sent to live at an institution. And this sort of honest look at the treatment of people with disability and how historically we locked them away and pretended they didn't exist and denied their humanity. That book just floored me. The candor and honesty of being able to talk about the terrible things we do to other humans. On a much downer note from *The Electric Slide and Kai* but I'm [crosstalk] excited that that we're having these conversations now and I think kids can handle them for sure.

Jenn: [00:30:04] Yeah, absolutely.

Alison: [00:30:04] I think it's adults, we’re the ones who have a hard time.

Jenn: [00:30:09] Yeah. Indeed.

Alison: [00:30:11] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:30:11] So maybe we go to something funnier, or…

Alison: [00:30:14] Let's do it, yes. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Jenn: [00:30:16] Do you have any early reader, chapter book kind of picks?

Alison: [00:30:19] *Skunk and Badger*, by Amy Timberlake and Jon Klassen. If anyone has not discovered *Skunk and Badger* yet, I just think it is a delightful read aloud. It is sort of chapter book level, but it works really well to read aloud to even younger kids. And Gareth and I have read it aloud together twice, because it is also funny, and it just feels like a necessary antidote to the horrors of 2021.

 [00:30:46] And it is a terrific friendship story about a kind of cantankerous skunk and the badger, who moves into his house. And there's, we quote it around the house, it is just, it's that kind of that kind of special. I've also read the sequel, which I enjoyed, though the first one is the one that really has the special place in my heart.

 [00:31:07] *Too Small Tola* by Atinuke is one of the most fantastic chapter books I've ever read. It is about a young girl living in Nigeria who is routinely told by her family that she is too small to do all kinds of things. And it's these short vignettes about her basically proving them wrong. And it's just a delight from start to finish.

 [00:31:29] So those are definitely on my top picks. And then I am a huge fan. This is sort of transitioning from chapter books to middle grade, a book that sort of sits right at the space between those two is *Ben Yokoyama and the Cookie of Doom*, which is book one of the Cookie Chronicles series by Matthew Swanson and Robbi Behr, who are one of the most dynamic duos I have ever met in the children's book world. They’re a husband and wife team, Matthew writes, and Robbi illustrates, and they're fully illustrated books. And I say, fully illustrated, like Robbi draws, and does incredible typography work on every spread. So for kids who are needing a little more visual support, or who just like pictures, which, frankly, is most of us, they're just so much fun.

 [00:32:17] And this is a series about a kid named Ben who takes everything very literally. And he gets a fortune cookie, and decides that what the fortune cookie tells him to do must be very accurate. It basically says imagine this as the last day of your life, live your life as if every day is the last day of your life. And he decides he needs to actually think that way. Like if this is the last day of his life, what is he going to do? And it's really fun. Ben is Japanese American, and Robbi is as well and that was not an experience that she saw represented in any of the books she read when she was growing up.

 [00:32:52] And Matthew and Robbi are, this is I know them well through work we're doing with them at FirstBook right now because they are actually pulling their four kids out of school next year and they are going to drive around the country on a bus. They have converted a school bus so they can live in this bus and drive around the country on this bus. And they're going to visit all 50 states and do a visit at a different at a different Title One school in all of those states and provide books to students in those schools.

Jenn: [00:33:16] How are they going to get the bus to Hawaii?

Alison: [00:33:18] That, they are not going to have the bus for that part. But it's the bus loads of books tour. And if you don't know them, you should totally get to know them, Jenn. They're just incredible and I've read all of their books, and they're all a delight.

Jenn: [00:33:36] Cool. I do not, so I will—

Alison: [00:33:36] The Real McCoy series they also did before the Cookie Chronicle series, and they're hilarious and also fully illustrated.

Jenn: [00:33:45] So my pick, I love the *Bunbun & Bonbon* series by Jess Keating.

Alison: [00:33:49] So cute. Yes.

Jenn: [00:33:50] The first book came out in September 2020. The second in February of this year, third in September of this year. They are very young graphic novels about an adorable bunny and a fancy candy who are friends. And they have various gentle and funny adventures. This is perfect for new readers who are just getting into chapter books but aren't quite ready for lots of text. So like, transitional early reader chapter book / graphic novel. They're totally cute charming, full of color, bright and inviting. And I love them.

Alison: [00:34:21] I think they're delightful, too. Jess seems to be able to do everything.

Jenn: [00:34:24] Yeah, she’s a genius.

Alison: [00:34:25] All ages, serious topics, nonfiction, fiction. Yeah, just a delight.

Jenn: [00:34:29] She was a guest on the podcast a long time ago and I learned about how wombat poop is square.

Alison: [00:34:36] Nice. And she's doing a lot of coaching now.

Jenn: [00:34:40] Yeah, she is. She’s great.

Alison: [00:34:44] Yeah, it’s super exciting.

Jenn: [00:34:43] I will put link to her website so that everyone can be reminded of her awesomeness. Okay, moving on to middle grade picks.

Alison: [00:34:51] I loved *The Year I Flew Away* by Marie Arnold. I don't know how many people have heard about this one or talking about it. I read the first chapter and thought the first chapter just had this terrific energy. And I literally sat in my kitchen and read it aloud, because it wanted to be read aloud. And I just really felt this book was middle grade gold. It is about a girl who has been sent by her parents from Haiti to Brooklyn to live with her aunt and uncle. The hope is that her parents are gonna be able to join her but initially, that's not an option for them. And she is struggling, like a lot of kids who are new arrivals, struggling to fit in and kind of find her place and missing her family. And she meets an elderly woman in the lobby of the building who offers her three slices of mango, and she can make a wish with each slice that she eats. And she knows this woman is a witch, but she ultimately cannot resist the opportunity to make changes that she thinks will make her more popular. And as an adult reader, you're of course, like, don't do it because you know, it's never gonna go well. It does not go well. But there's just so much rich fodder for discussion in this book. The choices she makes, the things that she gives up each time, have consequences that she can't see coming.

 [00:36:06] It's just really thoughtful. It's clever. It's got a lot of funny moments, too. It's definitely got this wonderful magical realism bent, and I just thought it was wonderful. So that's *The Year I Flew Away*.

 [00:36:18] If anyone has not read *Katie the Catsitter* by Colleen AF Venable and Stephanie Yue, it is a delightful graphic novel. And the sequel to that is also about to come out. Terrific superhero story. And that, I don't even say a whole lot more about it other than the end papers are to die for.

 [00:36:37] And then okay, I'm gonna, I'm cheating. I know, everyone's talked about this book. But I keep meeting people who know they should read *All Thirteen* and have not read *All Thirteen*. And I'm telling you, you have to read *All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys’ Soccer Team* by Christina Soontornvat because it's incredible. It's just incredible. I say this as someone who as a buyer was like, it's a $25 hardcover. That's an incredibly expensive book, I don't think I can buy this FirstBook, and then just kept hearing about it and thought I'll just read a few pages. And then I couldn't stop reading. And then I had to watch documentaries about the cave rescue and I felt smarter than the people who made the documentaries because there was so much information Christina provided to humanize the story. And to really help you understand all the elements of the rescue that people wouldn't necessarily know about. And I just, I think about it all the time. I think about it all the time. So if you have not read *All Thirteen*, it is never too late. You should read *All Thirteen.* I still can't, it feels like one that didn't slip through the cracks because it's winning a lot of awards, but—

Jenn: [00:37:42] It won literally every award.

Alison: [00:37:43] Yeah. Yeah. And deserved them all. Like I just, I can't say enough good things about it. And Christina’s writing is wonderful.

Jenn: [00:37:51] I will say, I do think that people shy away from, a lot of people shy away from nonfiction.

Alison: [00:37:56] Yeah, yeah.

Jenn: [00:37:56] And I get that, but also I realized that I learned everything I know from children's nonfiction.

Alison: [00:38:05] Me too. Me too. I feel this 100%, yeah.

Jenn: [00:38:06] I'm really good at *Jeopardy* entirely because of children's nonfiction.

Alison: [00:38:12] Yeah. Yeah.

Jenn: [00:38:11] And I remember James Holzhauer, the big winner of ever on *Jeopardy* also said that he gets his information from children's nonfiction. I'm telling you.

Alison: [00:38:20] Yes. He goes to the library and reads picture books. Yes. 100%. Like I know a shocking amount about all of these just random esoteric things and it's because I read so many picture books. And it's one of the great benefits of the job. So, yeah.

Jenn: [00:38:33] Yeah, and middle grade nonfiction is no slouch either. Like I distinctly remember the feeling of, I started *Most Dangerous*, the Steve Sheinkin book knowing literally nothing about Watergate or the Vietnam War or anything like that. It was not taught in school because we didn't get that far in school.

Alison: [00:38:53] Right, of course.

Jenn: [00:38:56] We stopped at World War II and I knew nothing except for like vaguely what I had heard in dribs and drabs, like the word Watergate. And suddenly I knew everything about it. I knew minutia about it. I was like, oh, I could teach a class about Vietnam War.

Alison: [00:39:11] Yeah, yeah. Yeah. That was, I mean, that was me and *All Thirteen.* It's actually funny, too. I was in our guest bedroom reading the book and Gareth kept hearing me gasp. And I was like, “What.” I couldn’t, like I was emoting so much out loud because I was just bowled over and I was learning so many fascinating things that he had to come over and be like, what are you reading? And I was like, this book is amazing.

 [00:39:37] Oh, that just made you think of another one that I totally loved *A Sporting Chance*, which is my gosh, I'm totally having a moment where I'm blanking on the full subtitle. It is about—

Jenn: [00:39:47] The one about the Paralympics?

Alison: [00:39:49] Yes, exactly. I'm blanking on his name, which is the worst part, but it is about the man who created the Paralympics, but it goes back much further than that. It talks about, he was a Jewish doctor living in Germany. Start of World War II was able to flee Germany by getting a placement in the UK at a hospital, but they sent him to a hospital for people who had very serious injuries from war. And they truly didn't think would recover. Because at that point in time, if you were a paraplegic quadriplegic, they just basically left you to die, they didn't know how to treat you.

 [00:40:22] So he is the reason we know that you need to turn people in bed so they don't get bed sores. He's the one who figured out all of these strategies to just prolong people's lives by preventing infection, and then also recognized the humanity in all of these patients and began asking them questions about what they were interested in, what would motivate them, and began to realize that they could do all sorts of physical things that people had written them off to doing. So it just like I came away, like this is one of the most important people that I've never heard of in my life. And that's another one where I just thought, oh I'm gonna read a couple pages. And then by the end, I was like this book, everyone should be required to read.

Jenn: [00:40:58] Ludwig Guttmann is the guy’s name.

Alison: [00:41:00] Ludwig Guttmann, yes, thank you. It's just superb. I loved it and I really, really wanted it to get awards attention last year and was really surprised, frankly, when it didn't. But also, there's been a lot of competition.

Jenn: [00:41:13] Yeah.

Alison: [00:41:13] So it doesn't mean that it is not superb, because it is that's *A Sporting Chance.*

Jenn: [00:41:19] I'm going fiction for my picks, and these are both my books, so it's a little bit of a cheat, but whatever, you know, what, listen.

Alison: [00:41:24] That’s okay, you’re allowed. Your [crosstalk] are allowed.

Jenn: [00:41:26] I'm not being biased, I promise. Linda Urban's *Almost There and Almost Not* came out earlier this year. It is about a girl named California Poppy who is sent to live with an aunt she doesn't know. She befriends a strange ghost and a ghost dog. Which is already a great start to any story, I think like ghost dog, I mean.

Alison: [00:41:43] 100% yes. I will read a ghost dog book, yes.

Jenn: [00:41:45] The stunning thing about this book is both California’s voice which is funny and endearing. You just love her. It's also weird. It's like a Polly Horvath, the best of Polly Horvath book, which I love.

Alison: [00:41:58] Yeah, that's a great comparison. I love that.

Jenn: [00:42:00] But also, I love how as we get to know her layers are revealed. So at first, it seems like oh, this is a fun book about a dog, ghost dog and a girl. But then you realize things about her past that she doesn't even know and what brought her to this house. These things are uncovered subtly and expertly, things about the past. Until we realize that what we've been reading is far richer and more emotional than we could have possibly known at the start. It's absolutely unforgettable, really special book that I think slipped through the cracks. So I hope a lot of people give it a chance.

Alison: [00:42:38] Linda's books always, her kids to me are just real kids on the pages of a book, always. I love that about her writing.

Jenn: [00:42:45] Yeah, she's amazing.

Alison: [00:42:45] Yeah, great choice.

Jenn: [00:42:47] I also want to give a shout out to one of my books from last fall. That I also think not enough people know about. The super exciting *Friend Me* by Sheila Averbuch came out in last November, I think, from Scholastic. It's a techno thriller for ages 10 and up about a girl who unknowingly makes friends with an AI Chatbot. And that AI will do literally anything for her. Which sounds great in theory. But if all computers are connected, and there's a computer who’s obsessed with you, maybe it could spread a rumor, or mess you up on social media. Or worse, like maybe it could stop a train, or cause an accident. It's kind of like a *Black* *Mirror* for kids or Siri on steroids. It's an absolutely wild ride that is kind of chilling if you're surrounded by computers and phones and smartwatches. But anyway, it's a great read for those who are ready for exciting, thrilling almost YA books, but are still not in high school and not ready for like, more adult content. So definitely age, 10, 11, 12, 13s.

Alison: [00:43:55] I love it. I have not read this book. And now I 100% want to read this book.

Jenn: [00:43:57] Oh, it's really fun.

Alison: [00:43:59] And also it sounds like it'll terrify me.

Jenn: [00:44:01] Yeah, a little bit. A little bit.

Alison: [00:44:05] That's okay. That's okay.

Jenn: [00:44:06] It’s a middle grade book, so—

Alison: [00:44:07] These are important ethical issues for all of us to be pondering right now.

Jenn: [00:44:10] Yes, it does bring up a lot of thoughtful issues. But of course, it's a middle grade book. So it does, spoiler, it does end on a note of hope. So it won't scare you too badly.

Alison: [00:44:22] All right, that's good. I appreciate that.

Jenn: [00:44:24] So I'm sure we missed a lot. There's so many hundreds of books.

Alison: [00:44:27] Oh, I mean, yeah. We're just scratching the surface. But that’s okay.

Jenn: [00:44:29] But this is a nice little sample, I think that people can get into.

Alison: [00:44:34] And of course, if listeners who are interested, want to go through the new releases section on my website and scroll back, they can see a ton of books that came out during this past two years that they might have missed. And *Publishers* *Weekly* has been doing little roundups of some books that slipped through the cracks as well. So I'll try and find those links and put them in the show notes, because there's so much good stuff.

Alison: [00:44:54] Jenn, I love that you include so many books and that you have cover images on all of them on your show notes. It's really helpful.

Jenn: [00:45:00] Well, I try. And also—

Alison: [00:45:02] I do know it's time consuming. But thank you for doing it.

Jenn: [00:45:05] It is. I also want to put links so that people can actually like click them and buy them, hopefully from bookshop.org, which independent booksellers rather than some other, you know, online retailers that are fine—

Alison: [00:45:17] Retailers who shall not be named.

Jenn: [00:45:19] Anyway, I didn't ask you this. And I'm actually going to make a note of where we are in this so I can edit this out if you don't have an answer. Have you noticed any big trends in books that are coming out books that are forthcoming? Have you been?

Alison: [00:45:35] Yeah, so, trees. This is like on a minutia level. Trees. Yeah, I actually created an Edelweiss catalog because I kept seeing so many tree books, I was like, I need to actually know if this is just in my mind, or not, and there were 40 picture books about trees that I wound up cataloging in the last year and a half, two years on Edelweiss. I don't have the exact number in front of me, but I can easily get it and send it your way, I can even send you a link to the little catalog that I built on Edelweiss because I just, everyone is like, oh, right, trees are a great way to engage in conversations about the importance of protecting the environment, or trees as a metaphor for your own body. Like *Be A Tree*, which is a gorgeous picture book that came out this year.

 [00:46:24] Anyway, trees, I don't I don't know what it is. But this feels like the year of trees, the year of trees. And I think it's continuing, I'm already seeing some things on the spring list that are that are trees. I’m a little like, I don't know if anyone understands just how many are happening at the same time, but it's a lot.

Jenn: [00:46:40] I didn't know. So there you go.

Alison: [00:46:41] Oh, it's a lot. It's a lot. And the thing is, a lot of them are great, too. So this is always the puzzle as a buyer when you're like, well, I can't buy 20 books about trees. But I would like to. So then you have to decide, okay, how is this tree book different from these other tree books and figure it out that way.

 [00:46:57] Obviously, social justice themes, activism and civic engagement, huge themes I'm still seeing appear in a lot of books. I think stories in which characters show a lot of engagement and interest in, you know, making changes to support their community. Affirmations. A lot of picture books, in particular, about kids, a lot of stories about kids of color, in particular immigrant experiences, but books that are very much affirming. You are enough. You are beautiful. Your history. The history of your people matters. And this is, I'm not knocking this, this is an important thing. We have not had books that do that. But that's been something I've been seeing a lot of almost more, I would say books that are in that vein that are affirming, sort of, I don't even know what like just kind of second person directed books that are like, you're enough, you're great. I feel like I've almost seen more of those than I have books that are just stories about kids and families.

Jenn: [00:47:57] I wonder about that, actually. I mean, I feel like—

Alison: [00:48:00] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:48:00] I mean, it's cool. And I'm glad that they exist. But also, it's a lot. And maybe we could also just have great stories about kids—

Alison: [00:48:07] Agree.

Jenn: [00:48:07] Doing awesome things or whatever. All kinds of things, yes.

Alison: [00:48:11] I think we're gonna get there. I think this is a thing we've never had, we have to create those. I think publishers are also, I think also kids are just in a really bad place right now. I mean, we all are, but just the mental health struggles, the statistics of what's happening. And you know, personal anecdotes. I know a lot of friends of mine whose teens have really struggled. I think a lot of publishers are also just being responsive right now to the fact that kids need to hear these positive messages. I think we're going to reach a point of saturation, though. And I'm hoping we're already moving into the space of what are just really engaging kid centered stories we can tell across all different communities and cultures and experiences. That's my hope, anyway.

 [00:48:51] But yeah, affirmations seem to have been a big, big piece of what I've seen published this past year. And I'm starting to like, I'm really only in the early stages of going through spring catalogs. But I'm seeing some of that come up in the spring as well.

 [00:49:05] And then there's just a random little collection of books this year that were about like building collections and museums. It was a small number, but just even to have five on such a tiny little, not tiny topic, but just unusual topic was kind of intriguing to me. They're really good. They work really well together actually, as well. So, yeah.

Jenn: [00:49:23] All right. Cool. So I have a very important question for you. Because you keep your finger on the pulse, with the caveat that awards mean nothing and nobody should ever be obsessed by them. It's a toxic impulse.

Alison: [00:49:37] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:49:37] And I certainly have never thought about them. That's a lie.

Alison: [00:49:40] Never. Yeah, no. And no author has ever stayed up wondering if they're going to get the call. Yeah, absolutely.

Jenn: [00:49:48] But ALA or whatever is happening this year.

Alison: [00:49:51] Yeah, January.

Jenn: [00:49:53] It’s happening in January and the big awards will be given out. So do you have any Caldecott or Newbery predictions?

Alison: [00:49:58] So, I always struggle with predictions because I love a lot of things. And in this year in particular, I have, my middle grade reading has been so much less than I would like it to be because I have, like a lot of people, struggled to read as much during the pandemic as I was before. But also because I've been working a lot. And so I've been reading less than I would like to. That being said, let me do Newbery first.

 [00:50:26] So the ones that I've read that I'm hearing get buzz about that, I would say, oh, yeah, totally get the buzz. *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps. I loved. It, God, ripped me in two. It is heartbreaking. But it's just beautifully done. And I think about it all the time. It's a book that has real staying power. And I love a good novel in verse. So *Starfish* by Lisa Fipps, I could absolutely see getting attention. On the quirkier end of the spectrum, like more unusual, *Pity Party* by Kathleen lane. It's such an odd and unusual little book, and I loved it.

Jenn: [00:50:56] Is that middle grade or YA?

Alison: [00:50:58] Oh, it's middle grade. It’s about middle school. But it is definitely, I would say accessible to middle grade, relatable to kids who are just like entering middle school. But it's also going to be funny to kids who are at the upper end of middle school, or adults like me who ever were in middle school. I mean, it is a book that is sort of like forcing you to step back and laugh a little bit at yourself, even while dealing with some really rough stuff. It's just a delight. And it's a very hard book to describe because it's not like anything else that I've read. It's the sort of short little vignettes, it's super accessible. And it's a quick read, but I loved it. I loved it.

 [00:51:34] *Root* *Magic*, by Eden Royce is stunning. I did it on audio, and then went back and read passages of the text in the print edition. It's a middle grade novel about a brother and sister who are in a Gullah family living off the coast, an island off the coast of South Carolina. And it's a horror story in that like, there's very real boggarts and creatures who her family are able to see and interact with. But also, I think the bigger horror in the book are the white people in this community. The police officer who wields an enormous amount of power and who you're afraid is actually going to harm her family.

 [00:52:13] So it's a really unusual story to have these two components sort of mingle so beautifully together. And it's set in the 1960s. I don't remember if I said that. So it's a civil rights era story, but it’s just so rooted in this time and place in this meaningful way. And it's also a very just relatable story about being a kid and wanting to fit in. The main character is a girl who really has struggled to make friends. That element of it makes you understand why she makes some of the choices that she makes in the story. It's also a wonderful family story. Like you get to know all the characters in this family and they're just wonderful people who are really loving and caring and looking out for one another. And I just I really, I think about that one a lot, too.

 [00:52:53] So yeah, I think all of those are really strong contenders. And I just started reading *Lotería* by Karla Arenas Valenti and I'm really enjoying that one. And I've seen that one pop up on some people's lists as well. I'm not far enough into that one to be able to say a whole lot about, you know, it's awards potential, but I'm really enjoying it.

Jenn: [00:53:10] Well, I have bought several of those books and read none of them because I'm a terrible person.

Alison: [00:53:15] Well, that's okay. Because notice, there's lots of books I didn't talk about. We all have these equivalent to be read piles, right?

Jenn: [00:53:21] Oh yeah.

Alison: [00:53:21] And mine are perpetually getting bigger and bigger and bigger. So shout out to all of you who have read a ton during the pandemic and wrote reviews because you're helping those of us who have not read as much.

Jenn: [00:53:32] Yeah, I have read a ton of romance novels, but that's about where my brain, I'm woefully behind on other things.

Alison: [00:53:38] Jenn, reading is reading. So that is totally good for you. Whatever it takes to get you through right now, [crosstalk]. Whatever brings you joy.

Jenn: [00:53:48] So obviously, I want all of my books to win every award, but I'm not going to name any of them on my picks for fear of jinxing.

Alison: [00:53:55] Yeah, that's fair.

Jenn: [00:53:56] And I don't have Newbery picks, but I do have one book not my own that I strongly feel will get Caldecott love.

Alison: [00:54:03] Ooh, I bet it's the same as mine.

Jenn: [00:54:06] Is it *Unspeakable*?

Alison: [00:54:07] Ah, yes. 100% yes. Yep.

Jenn: [00:54:10] Yeah. So *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre*. It's by Carole Boston Weatherford and illustrated by Floyd Cooper. I'd be shocked honestly, if this book does not come out with some hardware on ALA Award day, because it's both an important book. It's about a tragic piece of American history that is not taught in schools, but it's vital for us to know 100 years later.

Alison: [00:54:29] Yes.

Jenn: [00:54:29] But also because the illustrations are stunningly beautiful. And Floyd Cooper, the illustrator, sadly passed away this year in summer. And, you know, I think he illustrated 100 beautiful books, but this was his last work and a particularly personal and unspectacular one. Yeah, so I have to believe it will get a Caldecott Honor at least, if not win.

Alison: [00:54:49] Yeah, I agree with all of those statements. And I would also be surprised. And I just want to say I don't think it's because Floyd Cooper passed away that this book is the one that people are talking about as the most likely Caldecott title this year. It's just because it is an extraordinary accomplishment to take a topic that is this just emotionally… it’s just horrifying. It's a horrifying story. It's a story of a massacre.

 [00:55:14] Carole Boston Weatherford’s text is terrific. Like they really found a way to make this an approachable story to talk about with kids, and most adults also don't know this story.

Jenn: [00:55:25] Yeah.

Alison: [00:55:25] It is truly a history that was hidden from people, even people who grew up in Tulsa weren't taught about this in school. And I just, I think that the art is incredible. I think even the cover is incredible. The cover alone should win an award. So yeah, I think everyone will be shocked. You know, there's always that moment when we're all watching the awards, where you're like, wait a minute, they haven't mentioned this yet. Right? When they get to the last book, and then often it’s like, wait, there were like four titles we thought might get it that no one's mentioned yet. And only one of them's going to be named. I hope that's not how it feels this year, but it's always—

Jenn: [00:55:59] Well, you never know. And often—

Alison: [00:56:01] You never know, yeah.

Jenn: [00:56:01] It’s all—the committees are so… You just can’t tell what goes on in there.

Alison: [00:56:06] No, no.

Jenn: [00:56:06] You know they’re all working in good faith, so I'm not mad at them. But yeah, sometimes the picks are like, wow, I have never heard of that book. And that's a good thing, probably.

Alison: [00:56:16] Well, it's just such a funny numbers game, too, right? Where if a book doesn't get the right number of votes at that stage, then it's knocked out, even if it's actually the one that like if there was a second round, everybody would pick. It's kind of a, I don't know, I don't think the system is super flawed. I think it's very hard to create a system to do this kind of thing. I just think you never know. And I kind of like kind of love the years where we're all surprised, too.

Jenn: [00:56:36] Yeah. Absolutely.

Alison: [00:56:37] There’s the inevitability element of an award makes it a little less exciting. And also because I love it when a book that we do feel has slipped through the cracks really gets recognition. That's always exciting to me. But again, all this being said, this is another year where I feel like there's a lot of really strong contenders. I just still think Micha Archer’s day is coming at some point. I think her collage illustrations are stunning, like just incredible. *Wonder Walkers* is her picture book this year that's getting a lot of buzz.

 [00:57:04] *Milo Imagines the World* Matt de la Peña and Christian Robinson. I love that book. I love Christian Robinson’s illustrations for it. It's one that's particularly meaningful for us at FirstBook, because such a high percentage of the kids we serve have incarcerated family members and I love that it normalizes that experience and upends a lot of assumptions. Yeah, I don't know. I have lot of favorites. I have a lot of favorites. So, it’s a good year. It’s been a great year for picture books.

Jenn: [00:57:28] Hopefully, we will see many of them honored. And now we've talked about charity. We've talked about books, we've talked about awards. This is the most important part of the podcast. It is what are you obsessed with right now? It can be bookish, but it doesn't have to be. And while you are thinking of your thing, I'll go first.

Alison: [00:57:46] Okay.

Jenn: [00:57:46] My obsessions are actually usually not bookish. Usually I'm talking about some TV show. But this time, I'm making a sort of exception. So people follow me on social media will know that I was just in California for several weeks, visiting family and friends and doing a conference. And while I was there, I went to this amazing comic book store called Silver Sprocket on Valencia Street in San Francisco. When I say it was absolutely the comic store of my dreams. No superheroes. Everything was queer and punk and weird and beautiful. There was artwork everywhere. I went in there and I went into some kind of trance or fugue state. And just like, gathered all these books, and I was like, I'm buying all of these. And they were like, “Okay, thank you.”

Alison: [00:58:35] They're like you’re our new best friend.

Jenn: [00:58:37] And my client, [Becky sp?], who was taking me around, was like, how are you going to carry those? And I was like, I'm not they're gonna ship them to me. And they did. But that's… I just, I went insane. And it was just things. Obviously there were things from First Second and things that I've seen before, but also just a ton of small press, indie comics. Amazing stuff everywhere you looked, and I went a little bonkers.

 [00:59:01] One of the things I bought—

Alison: [00:59:01] Awesome, I want to go there.

Jenn: [00:59:03] You should go there.

Alison: [00:59:04] Okay.

Jenn: [00:59:04] Next time you're in San Francisco. So one of the things I bought was this awesome graphic novel. It's from like 2017, though I had never seen it before. It's called *Pantheon* by Hamish Steele. It was published by NoBrow. It's a story of Egyptian deities told in this delightful, expressive comic form. And this is the publishers copy, “*Pantheon* contains incest, decapitation, suspicious salad, fighting hippos, flying cows, a boat race, resurrections, lots of scorpions, and a golden willy. If that doesn't sound like a good story, I don't know what does.” So I guess that's two obsessions, both Silver Sproket, the store, which is on Valencia Street in San Francisco, and *Pantheon*, the comic book graphic novel about Egyptian deities.

Alison: [00:59:52] Awesome. I don't know this book but I have seen the cover.

Jenn: [00:59:57] It's beautiful. It’s—

Alison: [00:59:59] I definitely have not written that publisher copy, though, and they must have had a field day, writing it.

Jenn: [01:00:04] So Alison, what are you obsessed with?

Alison: [01:00:06] So, I mean, I have a super recent obsession that I'm just gonna mention because I'm not sure. I don't know, I obsess over different things at different times. Are you a *Ted Lasso* fan?

Jenn: [01:00:16] Sure.

Alison: [01:00:16] You can be honest. Okay. So Brett Goldstein is the actor who plays Roy Kent on *Ted* *Lasso*, but he is also a writer for the show.

Jenn: [01:00:25] Yes.

Alison: [01:00:24] Fun fact, he actually started out in the writers’ room and kept writing all this dialogue and was like, I, I think I could play this part. And then submitted an audition video and was basically like, if this is terrible, let's pretend I never sent this your way, and then became the Roy Kent we all know and most of us love. And anyway, but Brett has a podcast called *Films to be Buried With* that I don't even remember why I decided I would try listening to, other than just being interested in his story, and like really liking his writing, and the well, the writing of the writers for *Ted* *Lasso* in general. But I am now like, super into this podcast.

 [01:01:05] I love hearing people geek out about their craft, or the thing that really motivates and interests them. I'm not a big film buff. I enjoy movies. I would not say this is my language, though. But it is really enjoyable to hear people for whom it is their language talk about movies they love. And so he, on the podcast, interviews mostly stand up comics and filmmakers and some actors and has this sort of set list of questions he asks everyone. But the conceit is that all of them have died. So usually starts people, he has people talk about what they do, their sort of general career overview in a very brief, non self promotional way. And then he pretends like, oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. There's this thing I totally forgot to tell you. God, I really wish I'd sent you an email beforehand. I'm so sorry. But you're dead. You've died. Tell me how you died.

 [01:02:00] Then they say, oh, well, I died doing blah, blah, blah. And then he talks to them about it, he usually makes it a little more gruesome. It’s funny. And then he's he asks them, I guess even leading up to that he often asks people do you think about death much? Which is a really interesting question. And then do you believe in an afterlife? So they’ve sort of had this conversation.

 [01:02:18] So then he tells them, sorry, you're dead. How did you die? And then says, well, surprise, there is an afterlife, you're in heaven now. And here in heaven, they watch movies all the time. And so everyone wants to know, what is the first movie you ever saw? And then he has this list of questions, like, what's the saddest? What's the movie that made you cry the most? What is the sexiest movie you've seen? What is a movie that is great to you, not because the film itself is so good, but because the experience of watching it was so satisfying?

 [01:02:44] And I find myself, it’s just really interesting to hear people's answers to these questions. And Gareth and I, he's been listening to it some as well. And we've both been like noting all these movies we want to watch. And I, in my head, just keep also thinking about could we do this in the children's book world and who would listen, probably smallish group of us, but.

Jenn: [01:02:59] I would listen. I want to be on it.

Alison: [01:03:00] It’s really fun. Okay, well, if I wind up doing the equivalent of *Films to be Buried With*, I will absolutely call you.

Jenn: [01:03:07] Please do.

Alison: [01:03:08] But it's just really enjoyable. And I think also, you automatically put yourself in the role of what would I say, if I were on the show? Because you know, the questions you're going to be asked, and because they're just super accessible questions that anyone could answer. I don't know, I think Brett also is a really good interviewer because he demonstrates a lot of empathy for his guests. And these insights and his personality helped me get a clearer sense, too, of the kinds of conversations they have in the writers’ room for *Ted* *Lasso*. So it's fun. Yeah.

Jenn: [01:03:34] I do love Roy Kent.

Alison: [01:03:36] He is pretty delightful. Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

Jenn: [01:03:39] I just saw this keychain. There was an enamel heart that said Roy Kent in this fancy writing. And I wanted it but then I was like, I don't even use a keychain. What am I doing? I don't need to buy a keychain.

Alison: [01:03:51] It's so funny you say that because there's also a keychain. There's a Keeley keychain on Etsy that I like feel like I need to gift to someone and I don't know who and I don't know why. But it just makes me laugh every time because it's this whole sparkly enamel. I'll send it to you. I'll send you a link. It's very, it's pretty amazing.

Jenn: [01:04:09] And send me your links to the Edelweiss collections, too.

Alison: [01:04:12] Okay, I will.

Jenn: [01:04:14] Actually just because we're on, I should shut up now, but I'm not going to. One more thing.

Alison: [01:04:19] Yes, please.

Jenn: [01:04:18] I'm listening to this podcast. Because you gave me a podcast recommendation, I will give you one. Okay, great. *The Plot Thickens* is a documentary podcast about movies and the people who make them.

Alison: [01:04:31] Awesome.

Jenn: [01:04:31] It's hosted by Ben Mankiewicz who's the TCM guy since Robert Osborne is no more. And each season he does a deep dive into something and this season as a deep dive into Lucy and Desi.

Alison: [01:04:47] Oh fun.

Jenn: [01:04:49] And it's completely fascinating like I knew a fair amount about Lucille Ball, I think. I loved *I Love Lucy* when I was a kid and I’m a human in the world so I've read about them a little bit.

Alison: [01:05:02] Yeah, complicated story there.

Jenn: [01:05:04] Yeah. But I had no idea a lot about her and him. And they do an amazing job of really like, interviewing a ton of people, collecting a ton of audio clips from the time period and combining them in a way that is just really informative and totally compelling. I did not think that I would be like, eight hours into listening about Lucy and Desi. And still like, tell me more.

Alison: [01:05:33] That's awesome. That’s also me with Jad Abumrad’s*, Dolly Parton's America* podcast series.

Jenn: [01:05:41] Yeah, totally. And now I have to go back because this I think is almost over or about to be over. I know, I have to go back and listen to the other seasons, because I don't know what he talked about in the other seasons, but I'm sure they were also interesting.

Alison: [01:05:52] That sounds great. And I love a deep dive into something like that, too, when it's interesting. Like, give me more.

Jenn: [01:05:59] Especially now there's the *Meet the Ricardos* movie, which I will be completely prepared for because I now know everything.

Alison: [01:06:06] You're gonna be like me with *All Thirteen* and the Thai cave rescue documentaries, where I just feel like oh, please, you think you know?

Jenn: [01:06:13] Excellent. All right, Alison it’s been so great having you.

Alison: [01:06:18] Oh, I'm thrilled. Thank you so much for the honor of getting to join you today and talk about what I do and talk about FirstBook, it really means a lot. So thank you.

Jenn: [01:06:25] And I hope you and Gareth have a wonderful holiday and New Year.

Alison: [01:06:28] Thank you, same to you.

Jenn: [01:06:30] And we'll talk soon.

Alison: [01:06:31] Okay, I would love that.

Jenn: [01:06:34] Thank you so much to my guest, Alison Morris. If you liked the sound of any of the cool things we chatted about, please visit my website for the show notes, which will include links to every book and a whole lot more. Again, that's JenniferLaughran.com/literaticast.

 [01:06:49] There will also be links on both the website and social media for the FirstBook fundraiser I’ve started. I'll match donations from listeners, so please give by the end of the year to help FirstBook meet its million books goal. I hope that you will take some time this holiday break to take stock of the good things that have happened this year, lest we forget. And also, let's say, compartmentalize the bad things. And hopefully we will emerge into 2022 a bit more well-rested and ready for a big New Year which feels full of possibility. Even if that's just a superstitious feeling due to changing calendars. I don't know. It still feels hopeful. I hope that you all have a very Merry Christmas if you celebrate. Have a very restful break regardless, and a very happy new year. Thanks so much for listening, and see you in January.

[01:07:40] Literaticast theme music plays.