

**Podcast: The Literaticast**

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**Transcription by Keffy**

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

Jennifer: [00:00:06] Hello and welcome to the Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran. In addition to being your host, I am a senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency. We are the largest and oldest kids and YA book only agency in the US. Possibly in the world, I've not checked that out. Later in this episode, I'm going to chat with an editor who can help me answer some questions.

[00:00:30] But first, I just got back from the LASCBI conference. That stands for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators for those of you who are not in the know. They have conferences all over the world, like all year long, everywhere. In your neighborhood, probably. But their annual big conferences are in the winter in New York and a huge one every summer in LA. And this is the big show. It's huge. There's a thousand people there. It's inspiring. It's overwhelming. This is the first year that I've gotten to go since I've been an agent. So, in ten years. So I was quite thrilled that I got to attend, especially because I'm from Los Angeles, so I have family there and that was exciting to get a chance to see them.

[00:01:24] And there are just dozens of really super-sonically awesome speakers and teachers. I learned a lot. I talked a lot and I'm, honestly, I'm still kind of processing it. But, I know that many of my listeners might be wanting to attend conferences or workshops and I've attended a lot of them, myself, as a faculty member mostly, and I thought I'd give you my top tips.

[00:01:49] Now some of these are going to sound obvious and you'll be scratching your head, like really? You have to tell somebody that? But I promise. If I'm saying it, it's because it's happened.

[00:02:02] So, tip number one is all about self care. So this is a big tent kind of topic. I mean, everything self care. I mean, dress comfortably, this means shoes you can walk around all day in, clothes you can move in. Still be cute. I mean, I'm not saying wear PJs, but your, you don't want

to be so formal that you're worried about your zipper or something all day. Or you're thinking about how much your feet hurt while you're trying to impress people or learn. You want to be able to have a certain amount of flexibility and comfort. Also by self care, I mean, stay hydrated. Especially in Los Angeles in the middle of summer. Drink that water. Sleep. Have breakfast. Don't get too drunk. I know it is really easy when you're nervous and nervousness combines with having fun and meeting new friends and being excited. It's easy to forget to do all those things and stay up way too late and drink your face off. And that can be fun, but it will impede your ability to take in information and learn. And that's what's so amazing about these conferences is that they give you a long weekend where you have this intense opportunity to absorb great information, meet amazing people. And if you've impaired yourself or taken yourself out of the game because you're so tired or drunk or whatever, you know. That's not great. Especially because they're not always cheap. It's not always easy for people to attend these conferences. I know so many people have family to worry about. Other jobs. Or they just don't have the money and so if you get to go to one you want to make sure that you are taking care of yourself enough that you are able to really enjoy it.

[00:04:02] My second tip is all about expectations. And managing them. So a lot of people think, like, oh, if I can just meet an agent, they're going to fall over themselves to sign this. Or, if I meet an editor, they're gonna sign me up. They're going to offer me a contract right away. But truthfully, it almost never—it never happens this way. And it's just not how it works. I've had people sit down for a critique with me and be mad at me because maybe I don't rep whatever specific kind of book they've written. Or maybe they're mad because I don't love their book, or mad that I did really like it, but I say that it needs work or needs revision. But the point is not for me to rep you. For you to pitch me, and I'll say, I'll sign you up right now! The point is that you're getting a critique from me. For the most part, these are critique sessions. And instead of worrying, you know, that an agent doesn't fall all over themselves to sign you up, or worse yet, being pissed about it. Try to remember that if you paid for a critique, you should be getting a critique, not a golden ticket.

[00:05:19] Agents in the wild will rarely give any feedback about why something doesn't work for them. So embrace this opportunity for a relatively rare chance to pick an agent or editor brain. As a matter of fact, I know that, at the conference that my agency runs, which is... it's less. It's not like the SCBWI conferences. It's more like a real writer's workshop where you go in small groups and intensely work on your manuscripts. Sometimes people get upset if there's a writer running their workshop group. But after it's over, they almost always find that

the writers were the most awesome at giving feedback and gave amazing revision notes. And the point of the entire workshop is that you workshop your work and really dig in and make it even better and make it really shine. And the writers can sometimes give just as good advice, or better, than the editors can. So, you know. Embrace what you were given rather than worrying about what you're not given, I guess, is how I can put tip two.

[00:06:25] Tip three. This one is play it cool. Don't follow people into the bathroom. Yes, it really happens. Don't touch people who have not invited you to touch them. Do not hand them books or floppy disks or artwork or statuary or manuscripts that they haven't asked for, that they now have nowhere to put and have to find a place for or will lose. I know you really want to get your stuff seen, but that's not a great way to do it. You need to follow the guidelines.

[00:06:58] So, those are my top tips. I did read a great post by art director Guiseppe Castellano about SCBWI conferences in particular, that is a fantastic primer, I think.

[00:07:12] Literaticast theme music plays.

Jennifer: [00:07:12] It's long but well worth the read and I will link to that in the show notes. As well as I will also link to the Big Sur Conference because I think that that's a really special workshop and very different from what a lot of people have been to before.

[00:07:29] So now, during my talks, I got some questions that I thought it would be great for an editor to weigh in on. So, with me today to dish out some advice and maybe decode some editor jargon is Melissa Manlove.

[00:07:43] Melissa is a senior editor at Chronicle Books where she's been for about 12 years. She mostly edits picture books and non fiction for all ages. She's also a life-long bookseller and she's kind of responsible for my working at Andrea Brown, so obviously she's the best. So let me see if I can be technologically savvy and get Melissa Manlove on the line.

[00:08:12] Hang on.

[00:08:14] Hi, Melissa. Are you ready to help me give out some advice?

Melissa: [00:08:18] Sure.

Jennifer: [00:08:19] So, a woman at the conference did a revision for an editor and the editor apparently loved the project. But, it got shot down when she brought it to her committee. The writer in question was asking me this

question. She was so confused. She said, surely, if an editor loved it, that settles it. And I tried to explain, but maybe you can tell us what the acquisitions process looks like from your end and also where the editor fits in the hierarchy of a publisher?

Melissa: [00:08:52] Well, I... gosh. I mean, my sense is that where an editor fits in the hierarchy of a publisher varies somewhat per company and also per where you, what level you are at as an editor. Editors get quite a lot of respect here at Chronicle and our, what we call our make teams, that is the editor, the designer and the production manager, the three roles that are in charge of putting a book together, they get a lot of autonomy here to make the book that we think is the right book.

[00:09:33] And that spills over into the editorial discussions and our acquisitions decisions, too. There's a lot of trust around the table. But even so, even here, just because I love something doesn't mean that I automatically get to acquire it. I am, in the end, using my company's money, not my own money. So the company has to be pretty sure that they're going to make it back on the thing that I love.

Jennifer: [00:10:04] You do a lot of picture books. So what percentage of your list is picture books? Because I think I have some picture book questions.

Melissa: [00:10:09] Gosh, most of my list is picture books. I sometimes do illustrated books for older readers like, I recently published *Loving vs. Virginia* which is a documentary novel about a civil rights case that went to the Supreme Court. It does have some illustrations, some wonderful illustrations by Shadra Strickland. And some photos from the time. Quotations and stuff. But it's, it is a lot less illustrated than the majority of the books that I work on. So most of what I work on is picture books. Fiction and non-fiction.

Jennifer: [00:10:45] Okay, so this is an interesting segue from that because this is a question about how long a picture book biography should be. So this woman, no, I'm not going to say it's a woman. I don't know if it's a woman. This writer asks, she says wordcount, schmurdcount, I know. But I'm hoping you can help me resolve what I see in practice and what I've been told about picture book biographies. The ones that I read, especially the ones winning awards, have around 2,000 words, usually a little if not a lot higher. Yet the advice I repeatedly get is that text should be less than 1,500 words. I was even told so directly by a reputable agent. What is the disconnect. When do the actual words get, "added", and is it just that I'm a debut author?

[00:11:37] So I can tell you I went ahead and did a little bit of foot work on this, because, I mean, I don't keep a log of how many words something is in my mind. But I just wanted to see.

Melissa: [00:11:47] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:11:47] Like, how long are these books? And we're just talking about biographies. So one, I checked out Mesmerized, which is one of my books by Mara Rockliff, that was published by Candlewick.

Melissa: [00:12:01] That's a great book.

Jennifer: [00:12:01] Thank you. I will take credit for it even though really I only just sold it. It was—Accelerated Reader says that it is 2,400 words. But that's a lie. When I submitted it, it was less than 1,500. It was 950 text, 500 back matter, and sidebars. And while the back matter might have gotten more robust, it didn't get that much more robust. So, I think that's a lie. So then I was like, okay, let's look up some more. So Lights, Camera, Alice, which I sold to you, Melissa.

Melissa: [00:12:34] Yes, amazing.

Jennifer: [00:12:36] Was 750 words of text, 750 of back matter. So 1,500-ish.

Melissa: [00:12:41] I haven't counted.

Jennifer: [00:12:44] I did. I did count.

Melissa: [00:12:47] I believe you.

Jennifer: [00:12:49] Then I looked up some award-winners because that book is not out yet, so it cannot have won an award yet, but I looked up Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin which is about 1,600 words including back matter. I looked up Radiant Child by Javaka Steptoe, which was 795 words. It won the Caldecott, the Coretta Scott King. It really couldn't have won many more awards. But then there are outliers, of course, like Josephine. But that's also 100 times longer and for an older kid.

Melissa: [00:13:16] Yeah. Josephine is like, 4,000 words long and 104 pages.

Jennifer: [00:13:25] Yeah, I don't think... that's an outlier. What do you think about picture book bio length.

Melissa: [00:13:29] I think, I mean, as an editor, I don't... when I'm reading a submission of a picture book biography, and I am thinking that I like it. I

do not go up to the menus at the top of the Word document and turn on word count and see how long it is. Unless I feel like it's too long. And I'm using the word feel very deliberately because it is just a feeling and it's not about, like, rules, in the marketplace. It's about what's right for this book and its topic. And its audience. If you're writing for an older group, it can be longer. If you're writing for a younger group, it should be shorter, generally speaking. But it's also just about how long it takes to tell the story that needs to be told. Sometimes there are just a lot of extra words in there that the author is kind of sweet on but that don't need to be there. They found so much great information about their topic and they want to share it all with kids, which I understand. But a bunch of it should go in the back matter and some of it should maybe even just be held back for presentations when you share the book with kids.

[00:14:52] When you're like, and did you know?

Jennifer: [00:14:55] Absolutely.

Melissa: [00:14:54] Did you know this? And did you know this? These are things that aren't even in the book, and they're secrets, but I'm telling you.

Jennifer: [00:15:02] Or bonus material on the website.

Melissa: [00:15:05] Right, or the teacher's guide. There are a lot of places that you can put information when it feels like it's cool or fun but it doesn't actually serve to build the story that you're telling about this person.

Jennifer: [00:15:20] Right. So, I think this leads well into my next question which is kind of like a two part question, I guess. A person asks, I think my picture book is fun and just right. Well, kudos. What does it mean when an editor or agent says, I need to "leave room for the illustrator" and more generally, what are common rookie picture book mistakes?

Melissa: [00:15:46] Well, I can't be positive what this means in this person's case, of course, because it could mean more than one thing, I suppose. And it's also true that sometimes authors get feedback from editors that other editors hear and are like, I don't understand. So... It's always worth understanding that this is an extremely personal and subjective industry and one person's criticism will be another person's selling point.

[00:16:22] Josephine got submitted to, I can't remember, 17 different editors and declined by all of them before it came to me. And I loved it, so... but the very things that weren't working for them were exactly the things that worked for me. So, all of those as caveats.

[00:16:42] I think what could be meant when somebody says, “leave room for the illustrator” is that the writer is actually describing a lot of what you’re meant to be imagining. What you’re meant to be looking at. And that, sure, that’s fine when you’re just writing the words on the page, but then you have to go back and cut because you’re really, like, you’re not just treading on the illustrator’s toes, you’re stomping on their feet. You’re like, kicking the sand in their sandbox. This is their job. You know, when you say that Sophie is wearing a pink sweater, like, stop it. Why are you doing that? Why do you need to tell us that it’s a pink sweater.

Jennifer: [00:17:19] Because there will be a picture of that, obviously.

Melissa: [00:17:22] Right. There be an illustration and unless the sweater absolutely has to be pink for the plot, for the plot movement of the story, then it’s not your choice what color it is. And I think a lot of writers also are sometimes just not very good at imagining their book illustrated and how the page turns are going to affect it and that’s why I often suggest to writers, especially new writers that they dummy their book. They staple a bunch of pages together. And I don’t mean in terms of submitting it to agents or editors. We don’t want that. [inaudible 00:18:07]. But—

Jennifer: [00:18:07] Yeah, [inaudible 00:18:09] of trash.

Melissa: [00:18:09] Right. It is a really, really good exercise to go through as a writer so that you can pace your text out over the 12 or maybe 15 spreads that your picture book will take up. And do some really, really terrible stick figure drawings of what’s going on with each piece of the text, because suddenly, you’ll look at your dummy and go, oh look. On this spread, two people are talking to each other. And on the next spread, two people are talking to each other, and on the next spread, two people are still talking to each other. So nothing has happened in the art. That’s a problem.

[00:18:49] Or you dummy your picture book and you realize that for the first five spreads there’s like, two sentences on each spread and then the sixth spread has like five paragraphs. There’s a pacing issue.

[00:19:06] So, I think that’s a good exercise to really start thinking about what’s in the text that is going to be in the art and can maybe be taken out.

Jennifer: [00:19:13] Yeah, I do—I ask writers to do that often, too. I think that it’s really useful. But along those lines, I get this question so often, I feel like I

should probably have the answer tattooed on my arm or something, so I can just like...

Melissa: [00:19:29] You mean, art notes?

Jennifer: [00:19:32] Yes. Yes. How did you know? How do you feel about illustration notes in a picture book text? What is the best way to incorporate them, or should you?

Melissa: [00:19:41] I know that there are illustrators who want there to be absolutely no illustrator notes at all in a manuscript when I send it to them to see if they want to illustrate it. And that is absolutely fine. I will strip illustrator notes out of the manuscript if they're in there. In terms of authors putting them in, I just want to be sure that the authors are as vicious spare with them as they possibly can be. Like, the only reason an art note should be in there is if I, the editor, the person reading this manuscript before it's illustrated, I need to know this little piece. Like, the pig has just jumped on top of a horse. That sort of thing. In order for me to understand the next piece of the actual text. But, I mean, if the next piece of the actual text is, "Wilbur thought the view was much better from on top of the horse." You don't need that note. You know. Really, make sure every note that you put in is only there to aid my understanding because—

Jennifer: [00:20:46] Like a visual joke that I literally couldn't understand just by the text.

Melissa: [00:20:50] Yeah, exactly. Because otherwise, it very quickly starts to look like you're one of those authors who thinks that they get to tell the illustrator what to illustrate. Like, this illustrator is just working—it's work for hire. They're just going to illustrate my book. Because it's my book. And like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. In picture books, the author and the illustrator are seriously two halves of the team and we want to work with authors who really respect the contribution that the illustrator is going to make. They are going to imagine your story differently than you did and that's part of the magic. They will come up with stuff that you had not thought of and is amazing. I know lots of authors who have this experience, and they end up really, really glad that they emotionally stepped away from that and let it happen.

Jennifer: [00:21:43] Totally. I remember hearing many years ago about an author who was very upset because her book that she imagined to be rabbits or something ended up aliens or humans or something like that and she was beside herself that somebody would have taken her darling rabbits



and changed them. But actually, the picture book won many awards and was great. So she needed to let that go.

Melissa: [00:22:12] I guess she got a [inaudible 00:22:13].

Jennifer: [00:22:15] Yeah, she did. So, speaking of what kind of author expectations. What does a good working relationship with an author look like for you? Like, what drives you crazy and what are qualities that make a writer somebody you really want on your list. Besides just having a great book, obviously.

Melissa: [00:22:33] Sure, sure. Gosh, I work with a lot of great people and there's a lot of different kinds of great authors. Nobody should feel like they need to get out their pen and paper and start taking notes about what I say next so that they can fit their personality into the box that I'm describing, because I don't want them to.

[00:22:52] I guess, the thing that I like best about authors is a certain degree of flexibility. I want to work with people who, and I say a certain degree, because I don't want all of the flexibility. I don't want somebody who is going to tie themselves into a pretzel trying to make me happy. Because, and, I am never going to spend money on this book. I get free copies at the office. So, we're not making it for me. We're making it for the kids out there who will read it and love it.

[00:23:34] So, I want just the right amount of flexibility in that I want somebody who will truly open their minds to the feedback that I am offering them and consider it seriously and consider, like, if they don't exactly agree with me, consider if I'm maybe sort of edging in the direction of something that they do believe maybe needs a tweak or something. But, you know, I also want somebody who will argue with me if they think I'm just wrong.

Jennifer: [00:24:08] No problem. I'll argue with you.

Melissa: [00:24:12] I know. I will argue back. Some of my favorite arguments have been with you.

Jennifer: [00:24:16] Yes. So now, I think that's like, a lot of talk about picture books. Now I think we can move on to, well, still picture books. I think it's time for a little self-promotion corner. Since we're talking about picture books today, Melissa, do you have any new or forthcoming picture books you'd like to plug for me?

Melissa: [00:24:36] Oh gosh. So many that I can never really think of them all when people ask me this question. It's another—

Jennifer: [00:24:42] Oh no.

Melissa: [00:24:42] It's, well, I can think of a couple, but God. This is the trouble with working in publishing where I'm working on some books that are coming out next year, and I'm working on some books that are coming out in 2021. So, um...

Jennifer: [00:25:01] What about something coming out this week? Would that be helpful?

Melissa: [00:25:05] I don't know what happened this week. Let's see. This spring I published a picture book biography of John Newberry, by the wonderful Michelle Markel, illustrated by Nancy Carpenter. And it is a delight. It is another one of those books that the agent sent me the submission, and say, hey I have this biography of John Newberry, and I rolled my eyes and said, Oh God, it's going to be so dusty. It's going to be terrible. Then I opened the manuscript and fell in love with it because it's amazing. It's boisterous. It's full of verve and moxy and wonder. You know? And that's, that is one of my favorite experiences as an editor, when an author just completely turns me around about something.

Jennifer: [00:25:58] So, I'll tell you my self-promotion corner is Erica Sirotich who is the illustrator who brought you such images as my adorable podcast logo. Her author debut is Found Dogs. It's a totally charming counting book about rescue doggies. It's so cute. It's perfect little pup lovers in your life, and it is coming from Dial next week. Or possibly by the time you're listening to this, it might already out. Like, it might last week. Or last month. I don't know. Found Dogs is the point. It's amazing.

[00:26:34] Wait, I forgot to ask you. You did a very bad self-promotion corner because I didn't get the title of your John Newberry book.

Melissa: [00:26:38] Oh! It's called Balderdash! John Newberry and the Boisterous Birth of Children's Books.

Jennifer: [00:26:46] Nice. So now, finally, as always, I'm going to tell you what I'm obsessed with this week, and you can tell me what you're obsessed with this week. And it does not have to be bookish.

[00:26:58] So for me, this is apparently the week of foreign films. My little cousin Alice is visiting me from out of town and so I am stuffing her head full of knowledge and interesting things that she would not know about otherwise. So, last night, I went to my local art house to see a movie called Kedi which is a Turkish movie about the cats of Istanbul. And first of all, it was shot partly in my neighborhood in Istanbul where I lived, briefly. So that was cool. And also, it is entirely about cats, who are

awesome. And it is a cats-eye view of the world. I literally, seriously, do not know how they did the cinematography. Like, a kitty Go Pro or something. It was wild. The most close and intimate film portrait of cats I've ever seen. I feel like I've seen a lot of movies about cats but this was just really lovely. And I also really guess that I like seeing burly Turkish workmen cuddling kittens. It's like my aesthetic.

Melissa: [00:27:59] It's called kady?

Jennifer: [00:28:00] Kedi. K-E-D-I.

Melissa: [00:28:03] Okay.

Jennifer: [00:28:05] Turkish cat—

Melissa: [00:28:05] Sounds like fun.

Jennifer: [00:28:05] movie. Number two is, it's so beautiful. It's so relaxing, too, because it's cats. Chilling out. Doing things.

[00:28:17] So the second one is a Swedish film from a few years ago called *We Are the Best* or *We're the Best!* This one, it follows 13 year old girls who start a punk band. It is not a documentary, it is fiction. But it is possibly the best portrayal of 13 year old girls I've ever seen on film. It perfectly captures that moment when you're still definitely a kid but also you're not a kid anymore. You know, like, that moment. That teetering moment. I've seen it a couple times, I'm still in love with every character and I want to adopt them all, even though they would absolutely not appreciate that because they are punk rockers. Anyway. If you're a middle grade writer, I would, or you like middle grade books or anything, I would strongly suggest you watch *We're the Best!* Even though it is in Swedish, because it will speak to your heart.

Melissa: [00:29:13] Oh, that's good.

Jennifer: [00:29:14] Melissa, what are you obsessed with this week?

Melissa: [00:29:15] Oh gosh. I guess I'm going to say Venice because I have been working very hard on planning a trip to Italy for my parents that we will take this fall. And it's all northern Italy so we'll kind of end in Venice and I am nearly done with all of the planning and research and I'm pretty excited. I've been to Venice once before. I was there last year, but kind of fell in love with it. And there's a bunch of places that I still haven't been, so.

Jennifer: [00:29:50] Where are you going to stay?

Melissa: [00:29:49] I'm staying in an AirBnB about five minutes from the train station, so it's in San Marco.

Jennifer: [00:29:58] I just—I went to Venice last year, but I got incredibly sick. So, I hate Venice. But, I'm sure it will be lovely for you.

Melissa: [00:30:10] Well, we will try not to get sick. That is unhappy.

Jennifer: [00:30:14] I mean, honestly, do your damndest to not get sick. Because I tell you what, it ruins a trip to Venice. Because you know what Venice has a lot of? Boats.

Melissa: [00:30:23] That's true.

Jennifer: [00:30:25] Being sick in a boat is not cool. Anyway. Thank you so much for coming.

[00:30:28] Literaticast theme music begins to play.

Melissa: [00:30:30] You're welcome.

Jennifer: [00:30:30] I think that's it. I think that's all I have to talk to you about. Italy, sickness. Swedish films.

[00:30:42] So that's about all the time we have. Thank you so much Melissa, for popping by and giving us a peek into the editor brain. And thanks any and all listeners who are coming with me on this podcast adventure. I'd like to give a shout out to Erica Sirotich who made the absolutely adorable logo on the website, and for the podcast. And engineer Matt who is helping me make this sound good. If there are mistakes they are definitely mine and not his.

[00:31:12] I've started a Patreon to cover the hosting costs of the podcast. If there are dollars more than the hosting costs then they will be going to a scholarship fund for writers, which I will talk more about later. If you want to go check it out, it's [patreon.com/literaticat](https://patreon.com/literaticat). My Twitter is @literaticat. Melissa's Twitter is @mmanlove, or muhmanlove, and there will be links to all the books and everything else we talked about in the show notes on my website.

[00:31:46] So thanks so much and see you next time.