**Podcast: Literaticast**

**Episode: 45: Heroes, Villains, Sidekicks and Kryptonite with guest author Lamar Giles**

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

Jennifer: [00:00:05] Hello, and welcome to the Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran, and I'm a senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency where I rep kids’ books from picture books through YA, and everything in between.

[00:00:16] Today, I've got a great guest coming up. But first, I want to talk a bit about something I get a lot of questions about. And that is integrating pop culture into your manuscript. So here's the reality. If you're writing a contemporary story about real life, it's unrealistic for most kid and teen characters to not have them interacting with any popular culture. Whether that is social media platforms, technology, music stars, movies, books… Real kids know about this stuff and your characters should to, to the extent that it makes sense for the characters.

[00:00:50] I see a lot of people tying themselves up in knots about this, trying to make a book historical, maybe, just so that the kids won't have cell phones to solve a crime or whatever. And I gotta say, historical stories also have a host of problems. Like you have to do research about the historical era and get that right. Maybe it would be easier to just figure out how to make the cell phones work, figure out how to make them lose the cell phone, or figure out how to integrate the cell phone into the story.

[00:01:20] Anyway, just because you were alive in the 1980s doesn't mean that every book you write needs to be set then because you remember it well. And yes, friends, books set in the ‘70s, ‘80s, ‘90s, and even early 2000s are historical fiction. Your audience was not born yet. They have no frame of reference.

[00:01:42] So I'm in my early 40s. If you're close to my age, you were also a kid in the 1980s. Back then, I remember very clearly thinking of the Vietnam War, and like hippie times, like Woodstock or whatever, was absolutely history way before my time. Actually, they were just a handful of years before I was born. Like, less than 10 years before I was born.

[00:02:10] The end of the US involvement in Vietnam, was as close to my birth as 9/11 was for kids today. Can you put your mind around that? At that time, when I was a kid, World War II was so long ago, it might as well have been Ancient Greece. But in fact, World War II had only ended 30-some years previously. In other words, World War II was as long ago to kid me, as the ‘80s are for kids today.

[00:02:40] So what I'm saying is, you can't set something in an earlier era just because it's convenient. You've got to do all the world building that you would have to do for any historical era. And that's a huge pain. Probably huger than if you just set the book in a fairly generic now time. And figured out how to make cell phones be a thing. And in now time, kids are going to be grappling with tech and pop culture.

[00:03:03] However, you also don't necessarily want your book to become dated. In other words, if you name Friendster, remember Friendster? People are going to know your book is set in 2000-whatever. 2004, maybe. If you say MySpace, they’re going to be like, “Oh, okay, this is 2008.”

[00:03:25] So, you got to be careful with that, too. You don't want your book to be frozen in a time period. In other words, if you name specific hit songs, specific social media platforms, or specific fads, like oh, fidget spinners, then your book is frozen in time. Like, yeah, everyone will know that it's set in 2019, or 2021, or whatever. But what happens in 10 or 15 years? Your book is still in print. Will kids still be wondering, like, what was this old timer talking about?

[00:04:01] I think that there's a way to split the difference. Like if you need to reference something specific, either make sure it is something that is already a little bit niche. Like maybe your character’s really into modern art, like artists, comic artists, or authors. And those can be a fun Easter egg for readers who are in the know. Like, “Oh my gosh, this character likes Meg Medina, and I like Meg Medina!” That's cool.

[00:04:27] Or make sure that the thing has already weathered the test of time a little bit, it feels likely to continue to be popular. Like I think YouTube is one that probably will continue for a long time and has existed for long enough that while it might freeze your book a little bit in the sense that people will know that it took place in the 2000s. The early, you know 2000 to like, 2030, it probably isn't going to date your book into a specific year. Rather, more to an era. And I think that's okay.

[00:05:07] If you have any hesitation about that, in my opinion, the thing to do is to make up a name for whatever that thing is in your world. In other words, invent the names of the bands your characters listen to. Have them communicate on a website, or a platform that is like Instagram, or Twitter, but it's called something else. Give them a laptop or tablet, but don't get into specifics about make or model unless it's a crucial detail. Have them play video games, but don't necessarily name video games, or give them a name that you make up. Have them watch a show you invent or just describe what the show is. Like, “Me and mom love to watch this over the top dating show set on an island. But dad says it's killing our brain cells.” You know, like, we get the picture. We know what a dating show is. Even if we don't know your particular one.

[00:06:00] The concepts of computer, shows, video games, bands, those have stood the test of time already. You don't need to name every popular current name brand unless it's truly in your character's DNA to do so, and that's important for the story. Anyway.

[00:06:15] Okay, that's enough babbling for me. Let's get to my guest, huh? Lamar Giles is an Edgar Award nominee with thrillers such as Fake ID and Spin. He’s the author of middle grade fantasy adventure like The Last Last-Day-Of-Summer and his latest contemporary YA, Not So Pure and Simple came out earlier this year and has gotten five starred reviews. You're gonna love him.

[00:06:38] Let me see if I can get Lamar Giles on the line.

[00:06:45] Hi, Lamar.

Lamar: [00:06:45] Hi, how are you?

Jennifer: [00:06:47] I'm great. Welcome to the podcast. I'm glad to get to chat with you.

Lamar: [00:06:50] Thank you for having me.

Jennifer: [00:06:52] Of course. So you have a wide variety of books published and in progress. We have so much to talk about. You've got middle grade fantasy adventure, YA thrillers, YA contemp. And I heard through the grapevine perhaps some yet to be revealed superhero-inspired stories. Basically, you are prolific and amazing. So I'd love to ask you some craft questions. And also like some pop culture questions, too.

Lamar: [00:07:13] Let's do it.

Jennifer: [00:07:14] First, as I ask everyone, can you give me a nutshell version of your path to publication?

Lamar: [00:07:18] Sure. I naturally gravitated towards storytelling, ever since childhood. I just found the stuff in my head felt a little bit more exciting than the real world. And the thing about it was I didn't see a career path in it. I grew up in a factory town in Central Virginia called Hopewell. So all I knew were those kinds of jobs. You worked at the plant, or you're a teacher, or you worked in some office, or you went to the army, because we were next to Fort Lee.

[00:07:50] So I was almost 20 years old, when, in the year 2000, I read Stephen King's memoir on publishing, On Writing. And that book was the first thing I ever saw that explained to me how you could write something, send it to an editor. And if it was good enough, they’d publish it, maybe for some money. So I was like, yeah, I'm gonna do that.

[00:08:11] And so I sold the very first short story I ever submitted for $5 to a webzine that doesn't exist anymore. And I was 21 when that happened. And I thought, okay, this is easy. I'm already that guy. Let’s get ready to make the big bucks. And then for the next three years, it got real. All I got was rejections, zero acceptions. Wow, can I talk today? And all rejections for three years. And then I started to have like a more realistic trajectory, where I constantly worked on the craft. Mostly rejected, but some bright spots here or there.

[00:08:54] And during that time, holding down a day job, got married, and wondered if I was wasting my time. But through the process of absorbing good work and honing the skills, I wrote my novel Fake ID, which got me an agent, hi, Jamie. And my first novel sold back in 2011. I never looked back.

Jennifer: [00:09:11] Nice. So Jamie is your agent. And she's also my colleague at Andrew Brown. So spoiler, we have a bit of connection there. So I happen to know that you are very interested in pop culture. And I'm wondering, we're going to talk about specifics as far as craft goes coming up, but in general, how would you say that pop culture inspires you?

Lamar: [00:09:34] Well, let's get a little specific there. Let's say, how does ‘80s pop culture inspire me, because that's really my sweet spot. And that's the decade that pretty much formed my writing sensibilities. As I mentioned before about the factories in my town. My mom was one of those factory workers. And due to her working really wild shifts that changed all the time. I ended up spending a lot of time with my granddad who loved TV and I loved what he loved. And so we watched everything from Shaft to the Twilight Zone to Top Gun, to the Jeffersons. And when he wasn't paying attention, I was watching Aliens and Nightmare on Elm Street, the Highlander, and it's and somehow, I always knew those things were affecting me more than my peers. See while my friends were trying to do like what Michael Jordan does, I was wondering what a fight between like a sword wielding immortal and a Xenomorph would be like? I mean, I guess in a way, I'm still wondering, right?

Jennifer: [00:10:29] Amazing, and you can definitely see it in your work. I'm not gonna spoil anything, but we'll keep talking. So you juggle a lot of projects, as I said. What's your strategy here? Like literally timewise? How do you do it?

Lamar: [00:10:44] Well, the truth is, depending on the year, that process changes all the time. And I've tried to do the thing where I'm writing a young adult book in the morning, or middle grade in the afternoon. And that’s worked sometimes. And I've tried alternating days, when I'm going to work on this project on Monday and Tuesday, and this project on Wednesday and Thursday. I've tried powering through a first draft on one project at like double speed, and then thinking I could do the same thing on the next project. And that's sort of the mode I'm in right now.

[00:11:16] I've got two novels due pretty much the same day. So I'm pushing through one hoping to have it done in a few weeks, and then start the next. It's like, I have not found a concrete thing that I go back to all the time. But these little switch ups work.

Jennifer: [00:11:30] I feel like every writer I know feels like they are relearning how to write a book every time.

Lamar: [00:11:36] Yes. Yes.

Jennifer: [00:11:39] Which is not that helpful for people who want advice.

Lamar: [00:11:43] I mean, it's interesting, right? Because you want to tell people, this is how it's done. But I don't know anybody that does it the same way.

Jennifer: [00:11:50] Yeah. piggybacking off of that, can you talk a bit about your writing process? Like are you typically an outliner? Is it plot first or character first?

Lamar: [00:11:57] Sure, sure. So my preference. If no one's looking over my shoulder, I want to be more of a pantser, where I just write and see what happens. But I don't get to do that too much anymore, because you know how things in our business go where you can sell a book, without having written the book. But that tends to mean you need some sort of proposal, or summary. And so that has me going against my more natural inclinations, where I just want to see where the plot goes. And I sort of have to outline, beginning, middle and end to convince an editor to take a chance.

[00:12:31] And in that case, plot tends to come first. No matter how I do it, the best character stuff tends to happen in the moment or in subsequent drafts. I never have a character totally figured out when I start. It’s usually just a name and maybe some sort of unique skill or vocation. And the nuance of each character is still where I get to wing it, even though I gotta go against my natural instincts from time to time.

Jennifer: [00:12:58] And on that topic, though, how do you create and develop your characters? Specifically, can you share how you approach dialogue and how you craft individual voices to sound so unique and immediately recognizable?

Lamar: [00:13:10] Well, I wish I had a super cool answer for this. But the truth is that that stuff usually happens in the revision. So like, I could be halfway through a manuscript before I realize like, oh, he's saying it this way, because of XYZ. And then that means I got to make sure the rest of the manuscript sort of matches that motivation. And when I go back to rewrite, I got to fix the first half, too. And so it's just constantly this tweaking of the voice from draft to draft. You know, writing is rewriting.

Jennifer: [00:13:42] And speaking of revision, how do you approach that? Do you have a consistent process? Or is it different for every book? Specifically, you write a lot of thrillers, how do you approach story arc and revision when you need several layers of clues and misdirection.

Lamar: [00:13:54] With a great deal of anxiety.

Jennifer: [00:13:57] [Laughs]

Lamar: [00:13:58] Seriously, all jokes aside, when the edit letter comes in, I might not read it for like two or three days, especially if it comes in on a Friday. I just have to take a moment to get my head wrapped around the idea that I'm about to go in and read about all the stuff I messed up. And that's somewhat a negative view of it, but that's the way I process it, I can't help it. And then after I read it, I probably can't start the revision for a couple of days. I just sort of lick my wounds.

[00:14:27] But once I get to the point where I can start, the way I revise is I usually open up two documents, which is the original document that the editors commented on and a new blank document. And then it's a matter of, because I've read the letter maybe twice by then. I already know like general things I have to do. So then I'm going through line by line and deciding hey, can this make it to the blank document? Does it change or does it go completely? And that's pretty much my revision process through every draft. If I do a second draft, send it back and have to do a revision, I open up another blank document.

Jennifer: [00:15:04] You tend to write, in the books of yours that I've read, pretty fast-paced, cinematic scenes with just enough context, but not too much backstory or information. Like the backstory does not weigh it down. How do you achieve that balance in order to inform the reader, but keep the pace at a fast clip?

Lamar: [00:15:22] Well, this is still me leaning on Stephen King's advice from On Writing. He says you should always look to cut stuff, the formula in the book is first draft minus 10% equals second draft. And so I took that to heart back then and it's been 20 years of me revising and trying to exclusively cut things. And even if I have to change a lot of dialogue, to make the voice consistent, I'm looking for the shortest way to say it. I mean, literally down to the sentence. If it's a 10 word sentence, I'll say, is there a way for me to make it seven? And that's all King.

[00:15:56] Now, that's King.And then the part that's my TV, film obsession background, is the thing I noticed when I was like six years old. That when you're watching TV, at least back in the ‘80s, and a commercial break was coming, something exciting would always happen right before the break. Some new bit of info or someone was in danger. There was a hook that back then meant you had to rush to the bathroom, grab your quickest snack, and be back because you didn't have the benefit of a DVR or you couldn't stream anything. If you didn't make it back before the commercial break ended, you missed it.

[00:16:33] And so that bit of breaking scenes in a way to brings the reader back became intuitive to me. And I try to duplicate that experience in how I structure and end scenes and chapters. And so I try to keep chapters between 1000 and 1500 words when I can. Shorter is always better, if I can go less than that. I don't like to go too short. I don't necessarily like the James Patterson style of super short chapters. That works for him, but not so much for me. And at the end of those, I just need a line that's going to keep you wanting to come back. And I found the combination of Kings formula, and that, tend to create an enjoyable propulsive experience for the reader.

Jennifer: [00:17:11] Nice. Can you talk about how you are able to stay in the mind of a teenager? You aren't afraid of technology, clearly. In your book, Spin, you go deep into the online world of teens and build a story that does not ignore this very real modern way that kids interact. How do you do your research and stay up up to date on technology and teen lives?

Lamar: [00:17:32] Well, I think the first thing is I always try to think about the emotional stuff before I get into the tech. Because I've always had this theory that the emotional things that teenagers go through don't really change generation to generation. So like you're going to have insecurity, first crushes, first kisses, bullies, that sort of thing.

[00:17:50] And then if I can kind of get that part of the character down, researching the tech, at least for Spin wasn't hard, because I was able to go to the music first and trace that back to fandoms. And it's pretty easy to see the sort of social media that you find the most active music fandoms on.

[00:18:07] Now, I'll admit, it's becoming harder to stay up on the tech. Because there were times when I had a lot of access to younger relatives. At one point, my siblings were in the age group I was writing for, but now they're adults. I sometimes had cousins, but now they're adults. So, lately, I've been asking myself, how do I tap into the vibe for people that age and I end up watching a lot of YouTube. I look at the current content creators, particularly the young ones, and try to understand what they like, what their audience is into. And that's helpful.

[00:18:41] But I'm not gonna lie. Like I don't have concerns about keeping up these days. I hope I don't start to get too lost.

Jennifer: [00:18:49] I personally am obsessed with watching TikToks, so, I hear you. So Jamie told me, too, that you are extremely good at crafting short pitches. Can you talk to us about how you approach that and the elements of a great pitch?

Lamar: [00:19:04] Okay, so I always had this philosophy in my shortest pitches that stems from my love of comic books, and it's simple. A good pitch should give you insight into the heroes, the villains, the sidekicks, and the kryptonite. And to put that in less comic-book-y terms, you just got to make sure you tell a little bit about the protagonist, the people around them, and what's going to wreck everything.

[00:19:29] And I feel bad, I wish I had prepared to give you a concrete example of how that thing works for a specific pitch, and I sort of fell short. I've been meaning to look into that. And I don't know that I have one off the top of my head. Maybe Last Last-Day-Of-Summer, let me think. What's the best way to put that? Last Last-Day-Of-Summer is like the Hardy Boys crashed into the Phantom Tollbooth. So that's one part of it. That's like the real quippy logline.

[00:20:03] But if I were to get into the the part I talked about, hero, villain, allies, kryptonite. The Last Last-Day-Of-Summer stars the Legendary Alston Boys of the supernaturally weird Logan County, Virginia. There's Otto, who's a loving know-it-all. And Sheed, who's sometimes cranky, but always cool. And when they're tricked into freezing time on the last day of summer by the mysterious Mr. Flux, they unleash a bunch of weird creatures they either have to align with or battle to save the day. And so in that one, I tell you about Otto and Sheed, tell you about the villain, Mr. Flux. I tell you about the allies, the weird creatures, and the thing that's the kryptonite is frozen time.

Jennifer: [00:20:41] Nice. What is your dream project, not something that's already under contract, but something you want to have into the future like, you know, speak it into the world.

Lamar: [00:20:51] So dream projects, let's see, I always said I would love to write a young adult version of Blade for Marvel. I've gone on record many times about that, so I won't belabor the point because I actually have another thing that's a little bit more obscure, and probably people wouldn't expect.

[00:21:12] I really would love to write some short fiction set in the world of A Nightmare on Elm Street. Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors is in my top five most rewatched movies. And in some alternate universe, I feel like it could have been an adaptation of a young adult novel. And it's, to me, the undisputed height of that franchise. And I've spent way too much time thinking about an alternate aftermath than what was laid out for us and the sequels that followed. Like I want to write about the surviving dream warriors, Neil, the doctor, Max, the orderly, or the generation after them. And I don't even think it would have to necessarily involve Freddy Krueger per se, because I've thought about the conditions that would allow that kind of evil into the world, it might allow for some other fantastic possibilities.

Jennifer: [00:22:00] Awesome. Well, hopefully that will come true now that you've said it. Isn't that how Nightmare on Elm Street works anyway, like you dream about something and—

Lamar: [00:22:08] Dream about it, and dream about into a sort of reality. It doesn't usually go well. But that's kind of how it works.

Jennifer: [00:22:18] I have a couple of reader questions if you're willing to help me out.

Lamar: [00:22:20] Absolutely.

Jennifer: [00:22:21] So first up, a Tumblr user says, “How do I make the world more fleshed out in a contemporary book? I got feedback that the characters weren't colorful because of that.” And it's true. I mean, this is me talking, not the reader. But a lot of times people say world building in that context of fantasy, but you have to build a world in contemporary books to, right?

Lamar: [00:22:41] Yeah, yeah. I would, if I was to try to review that person's manuscript and see what it is that might not be popping for the reader, I think I would look for how their sensory details are set up. When I see early drafts of friends or students work, and I get that feeling the world isn't really jumping out. It's sometimes because I can't recognize the space I'm in. I think people underestimate how important that is in a contemporary, because they might be assuming it's our world, you already know.

[00:23:15] But if you're not paying attention to those sensory details, I think it detracts from whatever you're doing with the characters, because it feels like talking heads, which is more like a script. So without seeing the manuscript, I would recommend just maybe taking some time to see how much sensory details. What they're seeing, what they're smelling, what they're touching, what they're tasting, as well as what we're hearing from the character's mouths.

[00:23:36] And even then, that's not an easy balance to strike, because you don't want to overwhelm. But that's something you can fix in revision. I wouldn't stress it in the early drafts.

Jennifer: [00:23:47] Nice. Yeah, it sounds to me like the problem here is that it's a first draft. So here's another question from a listener. I'm still reading Not So Pure and Simple, so I don't know how it unfolds and ends, no spoilers. But I'm curious to know what inspired Lamar to write it and how he felt writing so candidly about sex and religion and toxic masculinity.

Lamar: [00:24:11] Well, honestly, about five different things inspired Not So Pure and Simple. I'll tell you one funny thing that inspired it, and then I'll tell you a little bit more serious thing that came after. The—

Jennifer: [00:24:22] Oh wait, maybe before we do that, you should give the quick pitch if you can of Not So Pure and Simple.

Lamar: [00:24:27] Sure. Not So Pure and Simple is about Delbert Rainey Jr, who accidentally joins a church’s purity pledge to get closer to a girl he likes and mild chaos ensues. He is the only kid in the pledge allowed to take sex ed. So he becomes the de facto Answer Man for everybody's natural but embarrassing questions. And playing this role puts Del at odds with some powerful adult forces in his community. And he'll eventually have to come to terms with his own true motivations, and if those align with his self-proclaimed nice guy status.

Jennifer: [00:25:04] Nice. So in that one, the hero is obviously—

Lamar: [00:25:09] Del.

Jennifer: [00:25:11] Del. The villain is the adults.

Lamar: [00:25:13] Yep.

Jennifer: [00:25:15] The allies are the buddies in the purity pledge and the kryptonite is—

Lamar: [00:25:18] His own attitude.

Jennifer: [00:25:21] There you go. Okay, so back to what inspired that.

Lamar: [00:25:26] So, about 10 years ago, my wife and I were at a church service in the summer, and it's a big church. So people don't really know us like that. And these three teenage boys sat behind us. And they're just talking loud about all their business, now, and one boy says that his mom walked in on him and his girlfriend having sex.

Jennifer: [00:25:47] Oops.

Lamar: [00:25:47] And yeah, this is super awkward. My wife’s like crushing my hand at that point. And his friend’s like what happened? And you know, he said, his mom was mad, but she sat him down and had a talk with him about being responsible, about protecting himself, about respecting his girlfriend. This is all pretty good stuff we're listening to. I mean, I think that's the talk you would have. And then he's like, my mom gave me a box of condoms. And his friends are like, what kind are they? And it's like, you can hear like, the boastful lying where he tells them. It’s like they’re Lifestyles. And one kid’s like well, I like Trojans. And other kid’s like I like lambskin. And like come on.

[00:26:29] But it got super crazy when an adult got to the pulpit and said, hey, everybody that's taking the purity pledge, get up now and reconvene in youth church. And all three of these boys got up and left. I never could stop thinking about that. It's been on my mind for 10 years, obviously. And that became like, those three guys became the template for Del, Jameer, and Qwan in the book. That's the funny thing that sort of inspired it.

[00:26:57] The more serious thing is the MeToo movement, because at first, I just had this funny premise. And around 2017, I don't know how to end it. And that's when the hashtag #MeToo blew up late that year. And there are all these stories about all these things that women have suffered through because of men.

[00:27:17] And in conversations with women in my life: my wife, my friends, even talking to Jamie, I got the message that the way that I could help is to talk to other men, because we're the ones who are sort of not understanding that this stuff goes on, and that we're most likely to cause of it.

[00:27:35] And that being said, I felt like this book was a good avenue to have those discussions. Sadly, I haven't had the chance to have the face-to-face discussions I thought we would have because of COVID. Usually, I would have been in schools all spring, and even into this fall, talking to people face-to-face about this. But yeah, and the sex and religion part, that part's mostly from me, growing up around churches and seeing a lot of awkward and weird, funny stuff.

Jennifer: [00:28:06] Well, I have to tell you, I am obsessed with this book. It is so great. Not So Pure and Simple is one of my personal favorite YAs of the year. And I'm very excited for everyone to read it. I know that your plans were a little bit derailed because of COVID. But hopefully, it's going to keep finding more and more audience, because I think it's fantastic.

Lamar: [00:28:26] Thank you. Thank you.

Jennifer: [00:28:28] And it's time for self-promotion corner. So obviously, everybody needs to buy Not So Pure and Simple, we know that. But also, you have an awesome middle grade The Last Last-Day-Of-Summer, which you sort of mentioned a bit. It is just out in paperback this week and by the time people are listening to this, it will definitely be on shelves. And the sequel is coming out next month. Do you want to pitch those so that our audience can order them?

Lamar: [00:28:52] Sure. We talked about Last Last-Day. I don't know if you want me to do it again.

Jennifer: [00:28:52] [Crosstalk]

Lamar: [00:28:57] Should I do it again? Okay.

Jennifer: [00:28:59] No, it’s okay. I mean, we know about the Legendary Alston Boys, who are like monster hunters.

Lamar: [00:29:05] I'm like, can I pull it together one more time?

Jennifer: [00:29:05] You can do it! You can do anything you want.

Lamar: [00:29:10] The Last Mirror on the Left is the sequel. So Otto and Sheed are back and they're dealing with the repercussions of The Last Day of Summer. But in an alternate universe where they have to chase down a dangerous fugitive and his gang. But in this reality, where everything is a little bit warped, they have to figure out if the fugitive is the problem, or the system that captured him in the first police. I don't know if I hit all my hero, villain marks there, but I’ll have to practice that one a little more.

Jennifer: [00:29:39] Well, I think these are terrific, fun, funny adventure. There's some fantasy elements but it's also got a realistic tone. So it's not like high fantasy or something like that. But I think a lot of different kids would enjoy it for sure. And those are middle grade books. Is there anything else important coming up that we need to know about? Or any favorite middle grade, YA, or even adult books that you want to shout out by other people.

Lamar: [00:30:06] I got one shout out. It’s a YA book from a stellar writer and my dear friend, Tiffany D.Jackson, it comes out Tuesday, September 15. It's called Grown. And if you're not reading Tiffany, get your life together.

Jennifer: [00:30:20] I'm excited. I have a galley of that. But I haven't gotten to read it yet, so.

Lamar: [00:30:23] Oh, you're gonna enjoy it.

Jennifer: [00:30:27] I'm thrilled. And all the books we talked about, Lamar’s books and Tiffany's book will be in the show notes. So all you listeners can go to my website and click on them and buy them. Our authors love your support. Now, at last, the moment that every guest waits for, which is the famous question, what are you obsessed with right now? I'll tell you mine first, so that you have time to think. And note, it does not have to be bookish, but it can be. And I think you're gonna like mine, I suspect.

[00:31:01] Because my obsession right now is Cobra Kai. I just binged the two seasons that are new to Netflix. It was a YouTube original, but now it's on Netflix. I binged them over the long weekend. I'm so excited for season three. This is the story of Johnny Lawrence. Most people will remember him as a villainous blond jerk in the original Karate Kid movie.

[00:31:24] It's now been 30 years. Now he's a washed up alcoholic loser. He's in a terrible apartment. He's got nothing going for him until he decides to open up his own dojo and teach the way of the fist to a new generation. But the thing is that a lot has changed about the world since the ‘80s. And the kids that he gets in his dojo are like, frankly, mostly losers and misfits, not tough guys like him. And they are very interested in things like social justice and inclusive language and not not beating up people.

[00:32:01] So the kids have a lot to teach him. Let's put it that way. The thing that I really love about the series is the characterizations. In the original Karate Kid, like the Ralph Macchio character, Danny is good. We 100% root for him. He's the good guy. And Johnny is the blonde devil, like he's 100% evil. But now we realize that actually, in adulthood, both of these men are deeply flawed individuals.

[00:32:25] Danny is not a good guy. He's successful. Yes, he seems nice. But he's also got issues and he has his head up his own ass, to be frank. Johnny isn't a bad guy. Like he was an abused kid. He had bad role models. But he's got a good core, and he's earnestly changing. There's also a lot of footage from the movies too, as these two work out their own issues with each other, because they've still got the rivalry even in adulthood. We see the same scenes that we previously only knew from Danny's point of view flipped around, which cast Danny in a much worse light than was ever in the movie.

[00:33:00] And that led to great conversations in my house about how, like, perspective changes so dramatically based on who is recounting a story. So I think that if you're a fan of ‘80s movies, or if you're fan of karate, or if you just are interested in nuanced characterization. It's funny because I never thought that I would say like, this was nuanced about Cobra Kai, but there you go.

[00:33:28] I highly recommended it. I devoured the two available seasons. And now I'm just watching all the interviews with the creators and actors that I can and anxiously awaiting season three. Apparently they already started to film it pre-pandemic, so hopefully it won't be too long.

[00:33:41] Okay, Lamar, what are you obsessed with?

Lamar: [00:33:44] Well, I'll tell you in a minute, but I want to say that I love Cobra Kai as well. I went through my Cobra Kai obsession. I'm a Karate Kid super fan and the film and its first sequel are also in my top rewatched films. And for my money, Cobra Kai, I think is the smartest combination of sequel slash reboot I've ever seen. I feel like this is the way you should do it if you're going to bring back these old properties. And it often made me think about franchises that could do well with that sort of treatment. Maybe we could talk about that, momentarily. I'll tell you what I'm obsessed with. I'll answer your question.

[00:34:16] I'm really currently obsessed with the Jimmy Olsen comics by Matt Fraction, Steve Lieber and Nathan Fairbairn. They're they're this funny and weird take on Metropolis and the character Jimmy Olsen, who we tend to know as Superman's buddy. And to be honest, I'm a little bit burnt out on the narratives where the heroes have to go save the universe. So this is a more personal story that gets into some of the history and politics of the old money families in Metropolis, which doesn't sound like something you would think would be funny on the surface. But the books are hilarious. They’re the most fun I've had with comic books in the last year. So the Jimmy Olsen comics are my thing.

Jennifer: [00:35:01] Are those only in like floppy or are they in trades yet?

Lamar: [00:35:04] I don't think they're in trades yet. I think, yeah.

Jennifer: [00:35:07] I will investigate.

Lamar: [00:35:10] Yeah. But super hilarious stuff.

Jennifer: [00:35:14] Awesome. I will look for them. My my good friend John owns a fantastic comic bookstore called Megabrain Comics, here in Rhinebeck. It is one of the very few black-owned comic book stores in the country. He's fantastic. He deserves every bit of business. I'm sure he has a ton of these books. So I will link to those in the show notes as well.

Lamar: [00:35:35] Excellent, excellent.

Jennifer: [00:35:37] So tell me more… now I want to talk Cobra Kai and reboots.

Lamar: [00:35:42] Well, Cobra Kai specifically, I just love it. I love it. I love the fact that you get to see the alternate takes on those characters as you mentioned. My wife and I have spent a lot of time, too, talking about the alternate perspective. And just the idea of like, Daniel is a grown man with karate beef. It's just so weird. And like, my wife told me flat out like, I don't know if we would make it if you came home saying stuff like, I'm not gonna let Cobra Kai get away with it. It's like the goofiest thing, but yet, it feels very grounded. And I feel bad for Johnny, which is something that never would have happened for 30 years prior to this show.

Jennifer: [00:36:25] Yeah, for real, like, it's amazing to me. I mean, I had, I hated him. He's a villain. He's a devil in the original. But now I really like him. I don't know, I feel bad for him. I want him to succeed. I'm rooting for him.

Lamar: [00:36:39] But it just like reminded me of old men feuding over the silliest thing. And like, if it wasn't karate, they’d be arguing over whose lawn is better. It's like these guys just have this eternal animosity, but also you feel like there's still some affection there. Like you wouldn't spend as much time trying to get under each other's skin if you didn't have some sort of respect for the other person.

Jennifer: [00:37:04] Totally. And, I mean, there's an episode called this, Alike But Different, or something like that.

Lamar: [00:37:09] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:37:09] And they're literally two sides of the same coin. Anyway, that's enough Cobra Kai. So this is not the Cobra Kai podcast, but—

Lamar: [00:37:16] You should start that.

Jennifer: [00:37:17] I'm gonna chat about

Lamar: [00:37:18] You should start that. Cobra Kai podcast.

Jennifer: [00:37:20] I might. Listen, when season three starts, maybe that's my new thing.

Lamar: [00:37:23] Call me.

Jennifer: [00:37:25] Okay, Lamar, it was so great to talk to you. Thank you so much, and I'll see you on the internet.

Lamar: [00:37:29] Awesome. Thank you for having me. This was a pleasure.

Jennifer: [00:37:34] Thanks so much to Lamar Giles for joining me. And thanks to you for listening. If you like the show, please leave a review on Apple podcasts or your podcatcher of choice. It helps more people find us.

[00:37:46] If you'd like to support the show, you can throw in a buck at our Patreon, patreon.com/literaticat. Again, all the books we talked about today will be up in the show notes on my website, JenniferLaughran.com/Literaticast. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.