**Podcast: Literaticast**

**Episode: 48: Two Times the Charm, with Guest Author-Illustrator Grace Lin and Guest Editor Alvina Ling**

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**Transcription by Keffy**

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

Jennifer: [00:00:06] Hello, and welcome to 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 young adult and everything in between. As I record this, it's a couple days before Christmas, publishing has slowed down for its long winter nap, thank goodness. And I have got a very special present for you.

[00:00:28] For the first time ever, I recorded with two guests at the same time, which, thank you. Yes, I deserve an award. And you're going to love them. They are lifelong friends and actually host their very own popular kids’ book related podcast, Book Friends Forever. It's Grace Lin and Alvina Ling.

[00:00:46] Grace Lin, is the author and illustrator of many, many books including the Caldecott honor book, A Big Mooncake for Little Star, and the Newbery Honor book Where the Mountain Meets the Moon. Alvina Ling is the editor in chief at Little Brown Books for Young Readers. They're both super amazing and I'm so excited to be talking to them today.

[00:01:04] So hang on, let me see if I can get Gracie and Alvina on the line.

[00:01:11] Hey, Grace and Alvina.

Grace: [00:01:12] Hello.

Alvina: [00:01:12] Hello.

Jennifer: [00:01:13] So before we get started, can you can you each tell me a little nutshell version of your publishing origin story?

Grace: [00:01:22] Okay, this is Grace, and I think I'll go first because I think Alvina’s kind of piggybacks off mine a little bit. So I think if anybody has read my book, The Year of the Dog, you'll know that it’s all about a girl named Pacy, who's the only Asian girl in her whole school except for her sisters. And that's pretty much true. I was the only Asian girl in my school except my sisters until one day out of the blue, another Asian girl moved into town and we became best friends. And that Asian girl was Alvina!

Alvina: [00:01:52] Woohoo!

Grace: [00:01:52] So we became best friends. And we really bonded over books. And then about two years later, Alvina moved away. I think we were in… Did you move away when we were in eighth grade?

Alvina: [00:02:02] It was three years later, it was after seventh grade.

Grace: [00:02:08] Yes. So she moved away after seventh grade. We still kept in touch. We wrote letters and letters to each other. This was before email, you have to remember. And so much so that we kept in touch even when I graduated from high school, and I went to the Rhode Island School of Design, I had known pretty early on that I wanted to be a children's book illustrator. So I went to the Rhode Island School of Design to become a children's book Illustrator. But finally in my senior year, Alvina and I finally did lose touch because I went to go study in Rome, Italy. And I think she went to go study in Taiwan, and it just became too hard. So we lost touch.

Alvina: [00:02:46] Right, it was pre-email. But I will say you came out to visit me in college, junior year. So—

Grace: [00:02:56] Yes.

Alvina: [00:02:56] Yeah, we kept in very good touch all the way through college.

Grace: [00:03:00] Yes, it was the it was the big foreign countries that broke us up.

Alvina: [00:03:05] Yep.

Jennifer: [00:03:05] Fair enough. Understandable.

Grace: [00:03:09]Then I finally graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design. And I did what all aspiring children's book illustrators do, and that back then pre-email, pre-Instagram, which was you got hundreds and thousands of postcards of your art printed up. And you sent it to all the publishers in the world hoping that an editor or an art director would pick up your postcard and say, “Wow, this is great. I want to publish a book with this illustrator.”

[00:03:37] So I did that. And I did that for years. And nobody called me to say we they wanted to hire me for a book. So I did a lot of really demeaning jobs as well as the less demeaning jobs, a scale meaning jobs. So from like designing beer menus to designing like t shirts that said, like world's best dad. And all the time sending out hundreds and hundreds and thousands of postcards for years, hoping somebody would hire me for a book.

[00:04:15] And then one day out of the blue, three years later, I got a postcard in return. Oh, no, actually wasn't a postcard in return. I got a phone call. And it was from an editor at Charlesbridge Publishing. And he said, oh, I've been seeing your work all these years, you've been sending it to me and sending to me and and I've always really liked your work, but I could never find a story that goes with your work. And I'm looking at your new sample. And I was thinking, well, this looks very narrative so I thought maybe you might have a story. Do you have a story that goes with this? And I said, Yes, I do, even though I didn’t. He said great, send it along.

[00:05:00] So I went home, I looked at my sample and I realized I had painted a picture of me and my mom in our garden. And I realized it was based on a memory where my mom used to grow Chinese vegetables in her garden while everybody else would grow flowers. And I used to be really, really embarrassed as a kid. And so I thought, okay, that's kind of a story. And I wrote that up. And to make a very long story short, because it wasn't like right away, obviously, we all know. But I sent that story to him. And that became my very first published book.

Alvina: [00:05:36] Which was called?

Grace: [00:05:38] Which was called The Ugly Vegetables. But it was around the time that I got my first contract that Alvina got back in touch with me, and I'll let Alvina tell her part of the story now.

Alvina: [00:05:50] Right, so for me, I guess my journey started as a child, being a bookworm, and just loving books and reading so much. And then my family moved to upstate New York, where Grace's family was. As Grace mentioned, we bonded over our love books. But unlike Grace who kind of always knew she wanted to be a children's book illustrator, I had no idea what I wanted to be. So my family moved away to California. I went to UC Berkeley undecided, it took me a long time to declare a major. I majored in Mass Communications, mainly because I couldn't decide. And, you know, I took all these introductory courses. And finally, someone said, you know, all of those introductory courses are prerequisites for the mass communications major, where you can create your own major. So I thought, sure, I'll do that. And I was interested in the media for sure. But being out in California there, the book publishing field wasn't as known.

[00:06:51] So instead, I did all these internships at radio, and film production, and Movie Line Magazine. And I liked everything, but I just nothing really clicked for me. So, I graduated and decided to move out to Taiwan, where my parents are from originally, because, I often say I'm kind of a typical Gen X, in that I was a slacker, but then I was also a child of immigrants. So I had to be productive while slacking. So I knew my parents would kind of support me moving there and learning Chinese. And I taught something, I taught English while there just to support myself.

[00:07:34] And it was actually while I was there, that a friend of mine… We're all trying to figure out what we wanted to do with our lives and he said, Well, you're always reading. Have you ever thought about book publishing? And I said, Oh, I'm not sure. I don't know how that's possible but let me look into it. So I actually went out and I bought a book, of course, called Making It in Book Publishing. And I pretty much just followed the advice of the book.

[00:08:00] So I came back to the States. The book said, that you pretty much had to live in New York City, or potentially Boston. So I didn't know anyone in New York at the time. But I knew a couple of my friends, actually, from high school, and then from Taiwan were going to grad school in Boston. So I thought, oh, you know, maybe I'll move out to Boston. But I felt like I needed to kind of save up money before I did that move. And then I told my mother, my plan of moving to Boston, and she said, you know who else is in Boston? Is Grace Lin. So our parents had stayed in touch, of course. And so by then we had email. So my mother gave me Grace's email address and I emailed her and said, Hey, I heard you live in Boston. I'm planning to move there to break into book publishing. And that's when she wrote back and said, Oh, my gosh, that's so great. I just got my first book contract.

Jennifer: [00:08:54] With a publisher in Boston.

Alvina: [00:08:55] Yes. So Grace said, Oh, why don't we be roommates when you move out here but then she said, Oh, but my lease isn't up for and I think it was like nine months. So I thought that's perfect, actually. I'll stay in California. The book Making It in Book Publishing said that book selling experience was good. It also said that, or library, taking classes, doing internships, so I thought, okay, let me work at a bookstore.

[00:09:23] So I ended up moving up to Oakland, where I had a friend who had a cheap room for rent in his apartment. So I lived in downtown Oakland, and I applied to all the bookstores up in the Bay Area, which, Jenn, I'm sure you're familiar with. But I was in the East Bay. So I applied for, you know, Barnes & Noble and Borders and also Cody's and some of the bookstores from when I was a student there. And Barnes & Noble was the first to contact me and they were the first to hire me and so I started as a book seller at Barnes & Noble in Jack London Square which is sadly no longer there.

[00:10:01] But it was actually there that I decided specifically on children's books. Before that I wasn't sure. And I just found myself gravitating towards the children's section. And I realized that those are the books that I was just the most interested in and the most passionate about. So when I moved out to Boston, I had already decided to just look at children's book publishers. And so, drove cross country, moved in with Grace, Grace said, you know, Charlesbridge Publishing has an internship program. So I applied for that. And I got that.

[00:10:36] And I worked at the Barnes & Noble in downtown Boston, which is also no longer there, which is also very sad. And one of my fellow booksellers was interning at The Horn Book. And so she told me about that internship and said, oh, you should apply for this internship when my internship is done. So I did that as well, and so I also interned at The Horn Book. And it was actually through The Horn Book, my supervisor at The Horn Book, she told me about an editorial assistant job open at Little Brown. So I applied for that.

[00:11:11] And that was the first, I will say, editorial assistant job opening in Boston in about nine months of living in Boston. But I ended up getting it. And so that was my entry into book publishing. And that was an editorial assistant at Little Brown Books for Young Readers. And I've been there ever since. So it's been 21 years. And I moved to New York City, and now I'm Editor in Chief. So sorry, that was a very large nutshell.

Jennifer: [00:11:43] I don't know what the largest nut is, but that was it. So it's been a couple of decades, what are some of the biggest ways the industry has changed since you both started?

Grace: [00:11:56] For me, I would definitely say We Need Diverse Books. My very first book was published in 1999. It featured me and my mom, obviously, I'm Asian, so it featured two Asian characters. And I remember back then, they were saying, oh, it's a multicultural book, you know, oh, you're a multicultural author and illustrator. And I remember being very kind of confused about it, and then slowly learning what that meant. And then also, like trying to fight against that, because it was such… back then it was not something that was going to bring you places. It was definitely considered a very, very niche thing to be a multicultural author and illustrator. And I feel like, for a long, long time, so many of us were talking about diversity and multiculturalism, and how it was so important and the whole idea of windows and mirrors. And we were talking about it for years and years and years. And I remember at one point, I remember thinking, I've been just talking about this for like a decade, and nothing has changed. And I'm talking to the same people over and over again, what's the point? And I remember thinking, I'm just not going to talk about it anymore. Like, I'm just going to have my work, my books be my advocacy. And that's it.

[00:13:22] And then, about five years ago, We Need Diverse Books popped onto the scene, and they changed everything. All of a sudden, diverse books, being multicultural, is marketable or wanted. And it's been such a change. For somebody who's been doing this for so long, it's been really, really remarkable for me to see that. All of a sudden, it's like, oh, they want diverse books now? Like, it's so interesting. But it's been also hard, because it's like, hey, like we keep hearing… For me, it's a little hard, because it's like, there's no Diverse Books. That why we need more. And I'm like, Well, no, we had diverse books, just nobody wanted them. Nobody bought them or wanted them. We had them. So.

Jennifer: [00:14:09] Yeah, totally. I mean, I hear kids, I'll say kids, the younger generation, the newbies who have only been in the game for a few years. I you see them on the internet all the time, bemoaning how slowly things are changing. And it's true. I mean, we are still having the same conversations a lot of the time. It's like you make progress towards more inclusion and it feels like there are a lot of setbacks. But the amount of change is actually astronomical in the past five years. So it is a little bit, I don't know, frustrating or interesting, I guess, to hear people saying that it's still not happening. But no, it really is happening. It's just everything is really slow because publishing is like an iceberg.

Grace: [00:14:59] Yeah, I mean, it Yes, we would love for it to happen faster. But considering how slow it was before. If you do it on a comparison basis, like this is just, this is just so fast. This is like a sprint compared to where we were. Before it was like iceberg melting.

Alvina: [00:15:17] Yeah, and I think to jump off that, I think a big difference I've seen, especially in the last five years is not just more books by and about BIPOC authors and other underrepresented groups being published, but better quality, and also just getting more attention from the publishers.

[00:15:34] So, you know, being on the publishing side, I feel like I've been publishing a lot of, quote, unquote, “diverse books,” my whole career, but it was only maybe in the last five to ten years that those books were becoming the lead titles on our list and getting the marketing money and getting maybe even a tour and that kind of thing. So, I mean, that could also be because I've risen in the ranks. So that it generally happens that the books that I edit, tend to get a little more attention, too. But I do think it's a combination of also just publishers realizing, oh, wait, you know, these books can sell. So let's put some money behind them to sell even better.

Jennifer: [00:16:18] Absolutely.

Grace: [00:16:18] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:16:19 ] So flash forward to today. You're still working together all this time. You've done picture books, early readers, middle grade together. At this point, how many books have the two of you worked on together?

Alvina: [00:16:30] Well, actually, I was… and I guess we should just mention that Grace and I did not actually work together for a long time, even though we both kind of got our start around the same time. So I ended up getting my job in ‘99. And I think that' when The Ugly Vegetables came out, right?

Grace: [00:16:43] Yep. And I was… I think that's the one thing I always try to emphasize when we do these interviews, because a lot of people kind of think like, oh, it's because Alvina was your editor. Well, yes, she is my editor now, but I feel like I kind of had to prove myself before we could actually work together. So I did publish with many other publishers before we actually worked together. So I did picture books with Random House, I did picture books with Henry Holtz, and Chronicle. So I had published quite a few books before Alvina and I actually had the opportunity to work with each other.

Alvina: [00:17:24] Yeah, I think it was at least 10 books, because I remember, when I finally was able to acquire a book by you at Little Brown, I think I said, like, oh, you've illustrated over 10 books, with other publishers. So, you had kind of established a name for yourself already. But the very first projects that we were able to work on together, were these Christmas board books.

Grace: [00:17:46] Oh yeah, oh God.

Alvina: [00:17:50] Which I think Grace always forgets about. We actually did two box sets. And it was, I think one secular, one non-secular and one box you you illustrated with animals and the other one with people and it was, yeah.

Grace: [00:18:05] So old.

Alvina: [00:18:07] I know. We actually reissued two of them this year? Is it Deck the Halls, and…?

Grace: [00:18:13] No, not Deck the Halls. Silent night and Hark the Herald Angels Sing.

Alvina: [00:18:18] Oh, right.

[00:18:20] So those were the first books that we worked on together. I think there are six board books. And then we did Year of the Dog was the first novel, your first novel.

Grace: [00:18:30] My first novel, yeah.

Alvina: [00:18:32 ]So we ended up publishing three books in that series. Year of the Dog, Year of the Rat, Dumpling Days. But t I think it was after Year of the Rat that we published Where the Mountain Meets the Moon. So those kind of two series kind of intertwined. But then it was Where the Mountain Meets the Moon, Starry River of the Sky, When the Sea Turned to Silver. And then we just did two picture books. So how many is that? 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15—

Grace: [00:18:58] Oh and don’t forget the Ling & Ting books. We did early readers.

Alvina: [00:19:00] Oh, yes, we did four Ling & Ting books, too, interspersed there.

Jennifer: [00:19:03] 18.

Alvina: [00:19:07] Yeah, and then we have a bunch of more coming out. So we have one coming out next year that Grace co-wrote and did not illustrate. And that's the first I think, for us to publish and that's called I Am An American: The Wong Kim Ark story.

Jennifer: [00:19:20] I'm familiar with that one, yes.

Alvina: [00:19:22] And then we have one with your client. Well actually both of them are your client. So Wong Kim Ark is co-written by Martha Brockenborough and then Once Upon a Story or Once Upon a Book, whatever it ends up being, co-written with Kate Messner.

Grace: [00:19:42] And that should come out in 2022. I'm working on the art on that right now.

Alvina: [00:19:45] So that was also a long… This is a pattern. We’re very long winded.

Jennifer: [00:19:52] Listen, I mean, this is like a holiday break [crosstalk] for everyone. Squeezing this in the week of Christmas. Thank you guys so much for joining me at this very, extremely short notice. And so hopefully it is long, so everybody can indulge in a little extra podcast.

Grace: [00:20:09] We always like really long podcasts, personally, when we record on our podcast, because then we can cut it into two and then we're like, oh, we're done for two weeks.

Jennifer: [00:20:21] So Grace, you seem extremely clear about your vision for your books. So the world wants to know, are you a plotter or a pantser? And also, how do you decide what kind of art to use for a given book or when to use a collaborator?

Grace: [00:20:37] So I'm definitely a plotter, much more of a plotter than a pantser. I have to know the beginning, I have to know the end, I have to know the middle and I have to know a fair amount of scenes throughout before I feel like I'm going to write a novel or write a story that I'll stick with. There’s still probably holes in it and things. And I'm very flexible about changing things while I'm writing. But I like to have kind of a map to know where I'm going. So I'm definitely much more of a plotter.

[00:21:09] And how do I decide what style of art to use? I think that's always been kind of decided by the story. I like to think that I kind of like to listen to the story and see what it asks for. So I have this, for the folktale books, like Where the Mountain Meets the Moon, and When the Sea Turned to Silver, and the things that I write about, specifically Asian culture, it's kind of… I feel like my style, I take a lot of inspiration from Chinese folk art. And I feel like that really suits it because it's kind of this mix of modern and old and folk tale and Asian American sensibility. So I kind of like to listen to that.

[00:21:57] And then when I do books that are not about that, or that are like Ling & Ting, I kind of felt like they were kind of more quirky, and simpler and funny, and more whimsical. So I use a slightly different style there. Whereas the ones for the fantasy novels were a little bit more intricate. And then of course, with A Big Mooncake for Little Star, it's a completely different style because I was trying to do something different there. I was trying to kind of show more of an American style. That sounds weird.

Jennifer: [00:22:46] More painterly or something?

Grace: [00:22:48] No, you know, I think so much of my work, before A Big Mooncake for Little Star was me trying to establish my Asian identity. I mentioned earlier about how I was the only Asian girl in my school until Alvina came along. And I think because of that I've always felt kind of foreign to my own heritage. And so, for a long time, a lot of my books were about Asian culture because I've been trying to connect to it. And so the art that I use for those books are kind of rooted in that Chinese folk art.

[00:23:31] And then, A Big Mooncake for Little Star, I think is the only book that is one of the first books that came out after the 2016 election. And that was a big, pivotal change for me, because for the first time after that election, I stopped thinking so much about my Asian roots and trying to claim my Asian heritage and I started feeling like I needed to claim my American heritage. Like, I needed to claim that I'm an American. And so I started using a different style. And this style was very much inspired by an American artist named Coles Phillips, who had a book called… not a book, it's a compendium, he had a compendium of his artwork called the All-American Girl. And so, his style, I really wanted to kind of claim that all-Americanness. So I really used that as kind of an inspiration for the art that I did in those books.

Jennifer: [00:24:35] Awesome. Have the two of you, as you work together developed an editorial shorthand with one another? How do you tend to work together when a project is in the revision stage?

Alvina: [00:24:46] This was actually… I'm not sure if we have a shorthand. Grace, I don't know if you think we do. But one thing I would say is, I think because we've known each other for so long, I tend to be much more informal, I think, in my correspondences with Grace than I am, maybe with other creators. It's funny when I look back, I remember we did a talk on Where the Mountain Meets the Moon. And so I looked back at my editorial letters, and it was kind of conversational and chatty. And so I feel like that's one way, I guess, that we we’re just… You know, I don't have to pretty up my language with Grace.

Grace: [00:25:27] Yeah, I don't really know. I mean, with novels, I don't really know. Because I haven't worked with… Oh, well, I actually have worked with somebody else now that I think about it. But so many of my novels are with you so I don't feel… I don't know if it's shorthand or not, or just the way we work.

Jennifer: [00:25:46] Fair enough. What are the biggest editorial differences you've navigated?

Alvina: [00:25:54] Well, you know, this isn't really editorial in the sense of the editing. But one thing that came to mind was, and this is more of my job as the editor, for example, you know, making offers and dealing with money. When we signed up Year of the Dog, Grace did not have an agent and so I made the monetary offer directly to Grace. And then Grace was like, can I have more and then I… it was just very, very awkward. And so I think that, after that, I think, thankfully, Grace, got an agent. And now we don't have to talk to each other directly about money anymore.

Grace: [00:26:32] Yeah, I think that—

Jennifer: [00:26:33] It’s for the best.

Grace: [00:26:32] It’s hard because you see both sides, when you’re friends like this. Because I understand that there's only so much money that can be given, especially back then, to a multicultural book. But at the same time, it's like, but I'm working so hard. And I'm spending five years on this. So it's kind of hard to put the friendship aside sometimes because so many emotions are overlaid with money. So after The Year of the Dog, that was when I decided, I need to get an agent. And it was, actually I think it was a really great thing. And it's actually been the most, I think it was the perfect solution. Because now we never have to talk about money. And she can do it all.

[00:27:17] My agent is Rebecca Sherman at Writers House. And like, I always kind of joke… I always say that, Rebecca and Alvina are the women behind my career, which I really believe.

Jennifer: [00:27:32] Well, yeah, I mean, I feel like it's such a relief, to not have to talk about money with creators. For an editor, that seems like your relationship should be art and amazing, wonderful things. And then the agent can be the bad cop and yell about money. And chase contracts.

Alvina: [00:27:51] Yeah, I mean, let’s be honest, I wish that I could have like an agent, too. [Crosstalk] it’s my least favorite part of the job. But that's all right. I can do it.

Jennifer: [00:28:03] So I get a lot of questions, especially in COVID times, but all the time, about just like burnout. How do you avoid burnout? How do you cope when publishing is slow? Or terrible? Or overwhelming? Or maybe especially perhaps, for new artists or artists who feel like they're on the verge of giving up?

Grace: [00:28:24] Oh, this is an interesting question. We actually did a whole episode on our podcast about burnout. What was it? Oh, episode 85. It was all on burnout. But I think that the people who listen to your podcast might want to hear something slightly different, because I'm thinking most of the people who listen to your podcasts are creators. And so I'm going to suggest if you are feeling on the verge of giving up, I would encourage you to give up, honestly. But I think life is too short for a life of unhappiness. And I've had lots of friends who are way more talented than me, who thought children's books was their calling, but they were miserable doing it. And then they quit. And now they're doing other things that they love so much more, and they're happier. And they’ve found a different calling. So I would suggest if you feel like giving up, give up, find something else. But at the same time in a couple years, if you find that nothing else brings you as much happiness or fulfillment as being a children's book creator, then you have to come back.

Jennifer: [00:29:49] Yeah, I actually think, interestingly, I mean, I think I've given this advice before, and people have rebelled against it a little bit. But I do feel like if it's making you miserable, stop.

Alvina: [00:30:00] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:30:01] But then just be open to the idea that maybe you're ready to come back. And we're not going anywhere. Books are not going anywhere. So, I do feel like that’s something to think about.

Grace: [00:30:15] I mean, I think that's a harsh thing to say. But I think that's what… after my first husband died, I felt miserable. And I felt like I was going to quit, and I did give up. And I gave up. But about six months later, I was back. I think what happens is you tell yourself, you're so miserable, and you hate all those things that make you miserable in publishing, which is completely justified, and then you tell yourself to quit, and then that's when you realize why those things are worth it. And I think you can't persevere until you know it's worth it.

Jennifer: [00:30:58] Yeah, absolutely. As a corollary, perhaps, to that, if you both could tell your new writer, artist self or your new editor self any advice, what would it be? Like you're going back in time.

Grace: [00:31:11] Alvina, why don't you go first?

Alvina: [00:31:15] Okay, except I kept thinking about different things that I might tell my younger self, and I couldn't really decide. I think, one, this is not wise advice at all. But there were maybe a period of five plus years, and when I was maybe from associate editor or to senior editor, where I would work til 10pm in the office maybe three days a week. And, you know, talking about burnout, that's not sustainable, and I loved my job. So I kind of felt like I was drowning, and I needed to work that long to kind of catch up or just to keep my head above water. But, you know, I think I would have told my younger self to cut myself some slack. And, don’t make my life all about work.

[00:32:13] Because for a long time, I was like, well, children's publishing is my life. And it really was. It was like, all my friends were from publishing, and I just feel like, my identity came from my job. And I think the older I get, the more I realize, yes, I still, of course, love my job. And I get a big part of my identity from my job. But, that was a lot of time spent in the office. So I guess that that would be my advice to myself.

Grace: [00:32:41] I think, for me, I think if there was advice I would give to my self. I would be… The one thing I really regret is that I did not really celebrate my first book, that book in 1999. When it came out it was a kind of quiet birth. And my parents are immigrants, obviously. And they didn't really value the fact that I had a new book, or a first book. And because they didn't value it, I kind of didn't really value it. I was like, oh, well, you know, and I really regret that because you'll never have another first book again. So my advice is to celebrate every accomplishment, you make. And your first book, your second book, your third book, celebrate it all. I mean, it's a really great thing that you are doing when you make a book. And as we said earlier, publishing has a lot of misery. So you've got to grab the joy when you can.

Jennifer: [00:33:46] Absolutely. Mine would be, not that you guys asked, but I'll tell you anyway. Somebody actually did give me this advice when I was very new agent. And editor told me to slow down because I was responding to my author so quickly, and trying to get everything done so quickly, and reading so fast and turning around stuff, like instantaneously, and answering emails at 2am. It was ridiculous, actually. And she said, You need to slow down, because at some point, you will be too busy to keep this up. And then people will resent you for not being fast anymore. And I was like, meh. And fast forward 10 years or so. And I definitely… that happened and I hit a wall where I just could not keep up and I was a wreck. And so I instituted office hours for myself where I try not to stay on my email past 7pm and I try not to answer email on weekends. And it's amazing how much better I feel when I have a break.

Alvina: [00:34:58] I know, it is great. I do that now, too. And I also do that when I'm on vacation is I don't… I completely log off and that. I wasn't like that as a more junior editor. So, yes, younger selves. Do that.

Jennifer: [00:35:15] Pay attention.

[00:35:17] So I have some listener questions, if you’re up for it.

Alvina: [00:35:21] Sure.

Jennifer: [00:35:22] Okay, so Matthew Winner, also a podcaster.

Grace: [00:35:25] Hi, Matthew!

Jennifer: [00:35:26] Hi Matthew! I'd love for you to ask Alvina if there are any book ideas she shared with Grace, feeling like Grace would be the perfect author pull it off. I know that sometimes editors will suggest story ideas to authors. With their special friendship, I have to imagine there's a whole lot of big magic going on.

Alvina: [00:35:44] Well, I think there is a lot of big magic going on, but not in that direction. So, I have given ideas to other authors. But with Grace, I think Grace is one of those creators who has more ideas than time to actually execute them. So I know Grace has given some ideas away to other authors. But I don't think I've ever given you an idea, have I, Grace?

Grace: [00:36:12] I don’t know. I don't remember. I feel like I come to you with like, I have this idea for this. And this idea for this. And what do you think is the best one? I feel like I use you as a filter more than…

Alvina: [00:36:25] Yeah, we do brainstorm together, but more so when we were roommates. So we, yeah, when we were roommates in Boston, I remember sometimes you would have oh an idea. That's actually how the book… Olvina, your book about the chickens. I had come home from work. This is when Grace was starting to freelance and work full time as an illustrator. And she'd be at home alone with no human contact all day. And so I would come home and she'd like, run up to the door, like a puppy dog. And be like, oh, my gosh, what happened at work today? Tell me. Tell me a story.

[00:37:02] And this day, I think the only story I had was I got a fax. Remember those, faxes. Anyway, got a fax from a foreign publisher. And she spelled my name wrong. She spelled it with an O, Olvina. And then Grace said, that's a perfect name for a chicken.

Grace: [00:37:18] Because I had studied in Rome, Italy. And olva means eggs. So I was like, Olvina, that’s a chicken name. And that was where the book Olvina Flies, which is sadly out of print now.

Alvina: [00:37:34] Yeah, we brainstormed the plot of that. And I remember, but. But yes. I don’t give Grace any ideas. She has them all.

Jennifer: [00:37:39] Fair enough. So, Linda Urban, wonderful author, who is my client, too. Hi, Linda. She asks, both of these women are in a wonderful position to really direct their careers and choose projects that matter most to them. And yet, I bet that they have things they still feel like they can't or aren't ready to do yet. I'm always interested when people swing big, and also when they still feel like a project or skill or goal is just beyond their grasp, for whatever reason. If either of them wants to talk about that, I'd love to hear it.

Alvina: [00:38:12] This is a great question.

Grace: [00:38:12] Why don’t you go first, Alvina?

Alvina: [00:38:15] So, I don’t think there's anything that comes to, say, my publishing editorial career, but, and I never really thought this. I guess in the past, I always felt like, oh, I don't know, I don't have the talent. But I think in the last couple years, I've been thinking more that I think I do want to write a book and publish a book someday. So I don't think I have the time right now or the energy right now. But I think that that is something that I haven't really admitted to myself or to anyone else that I think I do want to do someday. So that is that is something

Grace: [00:38:51] Oh, that’s so interesting because I feel like, for me, whenever there's a project, there’s always kind of a sense of fear. Like every time I start something, and I'm like, oh, I have this idea to do this. And usually, if I get that little sense of like, ooh, but am I good enough to do that? Usually, I know that's probably the project I should go for. So usually, I let the fear be the compass to tell me which projects I should go forth with.

[00:39:21] But I guess the one thing that I have felt the fear and I have not gone forth on has been the idea of doing a graphic novel. Like, I am really intrigued about the idea of a graphic novel, but I don't think I have the skill yet. I think it's something that I may be able to develop if I am able to dedicate the time to it. But then that's the second problem, which is the time and then of course the money to make it worthwhile for me to take the time to learn the skill.

[00:39:57] So I feel like those three things make it feel beyond my grasp right now. I don’t know if it's fear, or… It's partially fear but there's also the very pragmatic side of me that says that's just not what you can do right now. But I'm hoping to someday.

Jennifer: [00:40:18] Cool. So for listeners who didn't get a chance to hear our recent Book Friends Forever episode about imprints recently, Grace did kind of already answer this in that episode, but I'm going to put her on the spot again, because friend of the show, Martha Brockenbrough, asks, Does Grace ever want to have her own imprint?

Grace: [00:40:43] Yeah, we had a fairly long discussion about this on that imprint podcast. Um, I would actually, I would love to have my own imprint someday. But maybe it's a little bit about what the question that Linda Urban asked, I kind of feel like not ready yet. I feel like I need to accomplish a couple more things first. And in one of our podcasts, Alvina and I were talking about franchise authors. And I kind of feel like I need to be closer to a franchise author before I feel like I can have an imprint. So I feel like I would love to have one someday. I think that'll be one of my 10 year… I don’t know, 10 year dreams? 10 year goal dreams. But I don't think it's in the near future.

Jennifer: [00:41:31] Fair enough. So now it's book promotion, corner time. I love to hear book recommendations, especially now we have a bit of a break in publishing, a couple weeks to get cozy and read for fun. So what are some titles, maybe not your own, that you'd like to give a shout out to?

Grace: [00:41:49] So I'll go first. So I think I think most of the people who listen to your podcasts are probably book creators. So I think a really great book that I've been rereading is Elizabeth Gilbert's Big Magic. And I read that a long time ago, and I liked it enough. But recently, I decided to reread it. And I don't know if it's just the timing, maybe it's after the pandemic. But all of a sudden, it's really clicking to me, everything she's saying is really hitting me in the right place. And so I would really encourage creators to read Elizabeth Gilbert's Big Magic. I love what she talks about.

[00:42:36] This also goes to one of the questions we said earlier, how she talks about, like being miserable, and how so many of us think that to be a great artist, you have to be miserable, you have to suffer and be sad and all these things that we have told ourselves make a great artist, and she kind of dispels that myth. No, you don't have to be a suffering artist to be a great artist. And that's not necessary. And I think that's a myth that we've all kind of embraced that definitely needs to be dispelled.

[00:43:18]And the other books I was going to recommend. For YA, I wanted to recommend Mike Curato’s graphic novel Flamer, which is so, so, I don’t really read a lot of YA. But this this book was just so beautiful. It's all about this boy, basically realizing he's gay, and but it's done in such a moving way. Like I cried, and so it's like one of those things that breaks your heart but then mends it at the end. So I would definitely say Mike Curato’s Flamer.

[00:43:57] For middle grade. I have gotten an advance reading copy of Kate Milford’s The Raconteur’s Commonplace Book, but that doesn't come out until February 2021. So I suggest that everybody read Kate Milford’s Greenglass House and then when this book, The Raconteur’s Commonplace Book comes out, you'll be all set.

Jennifer: [00:44:22] Is it a sequel or a?

Grace: [00:44:24] It’s a companion book. So if you've read Greenglass House, you'll know there's a main character in that book. He gets a book that he reads. And this is the book that he reads. The Raconteur’s Commonplace Book is the book that he reads in Greenglass House. And I love how she has all these kinds of layers. The world that she builds has so many layers and so many characters that overlap and books that overlap and stories that overlap and I really love how she does that. It’s inspiring. That's kind of like what I tried to do with my Where the Mountain Meets the Moon trilogy, similarly, so I love seeing that in her books.

Jennifer: [00:45:03] She’s amazing.

Grace: [00:45:05] Yeah, it's just like the way she does her worlds and the way she writes it's just so beautiful.

[00:45:11] And then for a picture book, I would suggest All Because You Matter by Tami Charles and illustrated by Bryan Collier. I just think it's so beautiful. It's just such a beautiful book. Like I saw it, and I love Bryan Collier’s work, but I kind of feel like this might, to me, this might be my favorite of his books.

Jennifer: [00:45:36] Yeah, my colleague represents that book and she sent us the PDF before it came out. And we just all read it together, and cried, it's so beautiful.

Grace: [00:45:52] I really want a woman of color to win the Caldecott. But I kind of feel like I’m kind of pegging this one as the winner, though.

Alvina: [00:46:01] Well, Bryan has never… he’s only the honor multiple times but not the gold.

Grace: [00:46:06] Yes, he’s never won the gold so I do think it might be his turn.

Alvina: [00:46:11] Well, I have four recommendations, one in each category. And I'll start with board book. So Antiracist Baby by Ibram X. Kendi, illustrated by Ashley Lukashevsky. It's very clear and simply told. It introduces the concept of racism and the power of antiracism in a very child-friendly way. I actually got a copy of this for one of my nephews.

[00:46:36] For picture books, I'm going to pick The Bear and the Moon by Matthew Shepherd [Burgess], illustrated by Catia Chen. So, actually, Grace and I were both involved in the original art show. And this won the gold medal. So it's just about a baby bear and a red balloon and the moon and it's just gorgeously illustrated, whimsical. So I love that book.

[00:46:58] For middle grade, I'm picking a graphic novel. This was actually probably my favorite read this year, When Stars are Scattered by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohammed. And this is about a Somali boy living with his little brother in a refugee camp in Kenya, I think. It's really beautifully told and illustrated. It's heartbreaking. I mean, I cried so much. It's moving. But there is humor and hope, too. So I definitely recommend that one.

[00:47:25] And then for YA, I'm going to recommend Everything Sad is Untrue by Daniel Nayeri. It’s a YA memoir about his childhood in Iran, and then a refugee camp in Italy, and then he ended up in Oklahoma. And he has just a really tragic family history, but he's written it in a really engaging way. So I recommend Everything Sad is Untrue.

Jennifer: [00:47:48] Awesome. And I will put links to all of these books in the show notes. Now, a lot of people are going to have bookstore gift cards burning a hole in their stockings, because I imagine that this will probably come out either right before Christmas or right after it.

[00:48:04] So, any new books of your own to promote or forthcoming things that we should be sure to preorder?

Grace: [00:48:10] Oh, well, I actually don't have any books coming out until 2022. But I did have a couple of books come out this year, which is like the pandemic year. So all the authors I know, we’re like, what a year to get a book out. But I actually have…

Jennifer: [00:48:27] Well, I feel it’s still, it’s a long tail this year, right? So you can keep talking about… free reign to keep babbling about these books from this year for the next year.

Grace: [00:48:36] Yes, that's what I'm hoping. So all of 2021 I'm just going to keep talking about these books. So most recently, I had a set of board books come out. There are four board books as part of the Storytelling Math series, with Charlesbridge Publishing, and it's a really interesting concept where we're trying to teach kids that math is not just numbers. It's something that's every day, that it's something that is all around us. And it's kind of this way to show them how ordinary math is. It's not something to be intimidated by. And when Charlesbridge came to me, they said, we really want to make the characters diverse, which is why we thought of you. And it was kind of a really cool thing, because I know so much of what I want to do with diversity is to kind of show how people of other colors, it’s an everyday thing, it’s very ordinary. So when they said that but about math, I was like, oh, it's like the same thing. We want to do the same thing. What I want to do with diversity you want to do with math, and so it was this kind of cool juxtaposition or mending of the two things.

[00:49:46] So those just came out in October. There's one called What Will Fit? which features a Black girl named Olivia, who goes to a farmers market and wants to find something that will fit in her basket. And then there's one called Up to My Knees, which is an Asian girl named Mei who plants a seed. And she watches it grow and measures that with like, up to my knees up to my waist, up to my shoulder. Then I have one called Circle! Sphere! which features three kids, including Olivia and Mei, who blow bubbles. And they're kind of like, oh, we have a triangle blower will we still get a round bubble out of it? So it's kind of like talking about shapes in a different way. And then the last one is The Last Marshmallow which has both Mei and Olivia in it, and they are sharing cocoa and there’s three marshmallows and they have to figure out what to do with the last marshmallow since there's only there's two of them and one marshmallow.

[00:50:52] So those are the ones that that have just come out. So those are for babies, I hope people like them. Oh, and I also had, earlier in the year, in February, I had my Mulan novel came out which is the original prequel novel to Disney's Mulan movie, which also got lost in the pandemic morass. But if anybody sees the Mulan movie, or even if you don't see the Mulan movie, I hope you get a chance to read my book. It's an original prequel. So it was really cool. I got to write a lot of the backstories to the characters in the movie, so.

Alvina: [00:51:31] Yay.

Jennifer: [00:51:31] Fantastic.

Alvina: [00:51:33] And then, yes, I wanted to give a shout out to a few of the books that I edited that came out during the pandemic. So for picture books, I'm going to shout out Fire Truck Vs. Dragon by Chris Barton and Shanda McCloskey, which is a fun story of an unlikely friendship between a fire truck and a dragon.

[00:51:52] Middle Grade, I'm going to mention two books. The Only Black Girls in Town by Brandy Colbert. I call this the Parker Inheritance meets Grace Lin’s The Year of the Dog. And then Black Brother Black Brother by Jewell Parker Rhodes, which is about race and colorism and fencing.

[00:52:08] And then three quick YA shout outs. This Is My Brain in Love by I. W. Gregorio, which is a romance with themes of mental health. And then Agnes at the End of the World by Kelly McWilliams, which is a pandemic meets cult novel. So that was weird publishing a pandemic book during a pandemic. And then, last but not least, Camp by L.C. Rosen, which is a rom com set in a summer camp for queer kids and teens.

Grace: [00:52:35] You are so much better at doing this book… what’s your book about? I gotta practice.

Alvina: [00:52:43] It’s part of my job.

Jennifer: [00:52:45] So now is everyone's favorite segment, which is the what are you obsessed with segment. Your obsession does not have to be bookish, but it can be. I will go first so you too can think. Mine, first of all, media wise, I'm looking to do as little thinking as possible right about now because I'm totally fried from a very long year. So I'm just doing a lot of jigsaw puzzles while cramming in a rewatch of The West Wing in a hurry because it's going away from Netflix on Christmas Eve.

Alvina: [00:53:16] Oh no, I didn’t know that.

Jennifer: [00:53:17] Yeah, only a few days left. And I'm also indulging in some favorite classic children's book rereads because I did this TikTok thing of like what your favorite classic children's book says about you. And it made me inspired to reread A Little Princess which is very much a comfort read. I've read so many classics I've read countless times.

[00:53:44] But my new obsession that aren't those because it's new is this British show that there are full episodes on YouTube. It's called Taskmaster. So, Taskmaster is a game show of sorts. This guy Greg Davies plays the Taskmaster who's like the head of the game show. He brings a panel of British comedians to a weird house and has them do various absolutely absurd tasks for his amusement. Such as, here's a random example. The task will be transport this vegetable the farthest in 20 minutes, but it must stay on the carpet. So they'll have a red carpet with a pea on it or something. And each comedian is there by themselves doing the task and they will all interpret this in a different way. So one will try and just throw the pea as hard as they can. One will create a makeshift like trebuchet or slingshot or something. One will roll the carpet up and put it in a wheelbarrow and take it in circles around the yard. One will roll the carpet up and hail a taxi and go to another town.

Alvina: [00:54:50] Wow, okay.

Jennifer: [00:54:52] They all have different ways like however you interpret it is fine as long as you're following the directions that are under the card. The results are so absolutely dumb and hilarious. He puts these people through their paces. There's like five tasks per show and they're absolutely nonsense. And they're very funny. And each comedian gets points, and they're trying to win a terribly absurd prize. And it's so silly. And I love it. Taskmaster, available on YouTube.

Alvina: [00:55:23] I’m gonna check it out.

Jennifer: [00:55:23] So Grace and Alvina, what are you guys obsessed with?

Alvina: [00:55:28] I guess I'll go first. Well, I'll mention two things. So one is, I have been binge watching 90-Day Fiancé. So if you need a mindless, kind of, it's not mindless, but just kind of, this is a show I watch when I just want to vege, you know, because there's lots of drama. And there's humor, and there's outrage. And there are also a lot of seasons, so there's plenty to watch.

[00:55:54] And then the other thing I'll mention is I'm kind of obsessed. I've always been obsessed. Not always, but with kind of true crime and serial killers and things like that. So I was on vacation, staycation, a couple weeks ago, and I had binge watched a ton of true crime documentaries. And I'll just mention two that I watched that week that I thought were particularly well done. They actually both happened to be on HBO, one is called I'll Be Gone in the Dark, which was inspired by the book by the same name, which is about the Golden State Killer. And then the other one is called Murder on Middle Beach, which is by a young filmmaker whose name is Madison, and his mother was brutally murdered in Connecticut when he was a teenager and he was away at school. And it has never been solved. And so he started making this documentary about his mother's death when he was in college as a college project, and I think he spent eight years making it. And I think it's a four episode arc and it's just so beautifully done. I just, after I finished it, I thought, oh my gosh, this this whole documentary series was so well crafted. That I was just really impressed. So I would recommend Murder on Middle Beach.

Grace: [00:57:22] And they never found—

Jennifer: [00:57:21] That sounds terrifying.

Alvina: [00:57:23] Maybe not to Grace because she's squeamish.

Grace: [00:57:25] Yes—

Jennifer: [00:57:29] Grace, what are you obsessed with?

Grace: [00:57:29] It's really funny. I am squeamish and I'm also… I don't really watch any TV so that's why these things are always so interesting to me like everybody has like and you should watch this and it's like and so I always feel a little bit out of it but.

Jennifer: [00:57:42] Your thing could be food, it could be anything. It does not have to be a TV show.

Grace: [00:57:47] All right, good. Because I was the thing that I was thinking was what has been occupying a lot of my time has been writing chicken Christmas carols.

Jennifer: [00:57:59] Nice.

Grace: [00:57:59] So, because we can't go out to to see relatives or anything like that. So we've been working really hard to try to make Christmas feel really special for just the three of us, my husband and my daughter. And so we have chickens and so we decided to make it feel special. We put up a tree in the chicken run. And we're gonna decorate it with like things that chickens can eat with like cranberries and unsalted popcorn. And then we're inviting her, she has a pod of three other girls and we're inviting her pod girls to come over and we're all going to decorate the chicken Christmas tree and sing carols to the chickens. And to sing carols the chickens we are changing all the carols so they are chicken or bird related so like it's like Duck the Halls. Like, Deck the Halls. Or [singing] We wish you a merry quackmas, we wish you a merry quackmas, and a happy chicken. Things like that.

Jennifer: [00:59:05] Fabulous.

Grace: [00:59:05] So I am rewriting Christmas carols so that they are chicken and bird related. So that has been taking up a lot of my time. I'm not quite sure if I'm obsessed with it but it is very time consuming.

Jennifer: [00:59:22] That’s fair enough, I love it. And on that note, I think that is the perfect way to close the show. We will have everyone have chicken Christmas carols in their heads.

Alvina: [00:59:35] We wish everyone a Merry Quackmas.

Grace: [00:59:37] And a happy chicken.

Jennifer: [00:59:41] Yes. Thank you, Grace and Alvina, so much for joining me.

Alvina: [00:59:44] Thank you, Jenn, this was fun.

Grace: [00:59:44] Thanks, Jenn! Bye.

[00:59:45] Literaticast theme music plays in the background throughout the outro.

Jennifer: [00:59:48] Thank you so much to my guests, Grace Lin and Alvina Ling. And thanks to all of you for listening. If you like the show, we have a Patreon. It’s Patreon.com/Literaticat. Throw in a buck and you help keep the show going. Another thing that helps Google find us is if you write a review on Apple podcasts or your pod catcher of choice. I mean if you liked the show, obviously. If you hate it, wo, you're pretty dedicated for making it this far in, so thank you.

[01:00:18] All the books we've talked about are up in the show notes on my website. That's at JenniferLaughran.com/Literaticast so please go check them out.

[01:00:25] Anyway, I hope you have a very warm and cozy and safe holiday break. Spread joy, not germs and get a chance to rest up and read lots of great books to prepare for the new year.

[01:00:37] Woohoo! I do not want to speak too soon, but we've almost made it, guys. So everyone just take it nice and easy. Let's slip into this new year without getting anybody riled up. And [exhales] we made it. Take very good care, and I’ll see you next year.