**Podcast: Literaticast**

**Episode: 53: Keeping it Honest, with guest author Maggie Tokuda-Hall**

**File Name: Maggie\_mixdownAPR\_.mp3**

**File Length: 01:00:24**

**Transcription by Keffy**

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

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

[00:00:16] Up front, I want to remind listeners that there's a Patreon for this podcast, throw in a buck and you help this keep this going. It's patreon.com/literaticat. And if you liked the show, it'd be great if you could leave a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to it. More reviews help more folks find the show. Thank you to everyone who supports the show, whether on Patreon or by reviewing it, tweeting about it, telling a friend, you rock.

[00:00:43] I'm recording this on Valentine's Day, 2022. Happy Valentine's Day. Now, this was supposed to be the January episode of the podcast. But as with so many things in this COVID era, we were hit with supply chain issues. The book that my guest is going to be talking about today was supposed to come out in January. Well, around January 28th, we realized the book just wasn't out. It didn't exist in stores yet even though the computer was still saying January 28th. It was not in stores. It was not in the warehouse. It had cleared customs, we knew that. So we knew it was in the country but it was on a truck someplace random that it was not supposed to be.

[00:01:21] So the date got moved to February 1st. Needless to say February 1st rolled around and the same story. So it got pushed to February 8th, at which point there were massive storms in the Northeast messing everything up. And now it's Valentine's Day and here we are. I just got my copies today so they're real. And I'm happy to report that the books are actually in stores now or reaching stores now. So if you're listening and you want to buy a copy, there will be links in the show notes where you can do so. Anyway.

[00:01:50] My guest today is one of my clients, actually, although we knew each other before she was even an author or I was an agent as we worked together at a bookstore in the Bay Area many moons ago in another life.

[00:02:02] Maggie Tokuda-Hall is the author of numerous books both out and forthcoming. Her first book was a funny picture book about how to tell a story called *Also An Octopus*. She has now also a lush, YA fantasy out, *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea*, which I've talked about on this podcast. She's the author of the awesome YA graphic novel *Squad* about a pack of girl werewolves who feast on bros at parties. And her latest book is picture book nonfiction about her own grandparents’ remarkable love story. We're going to talk about all that and about MFA programs and many other topics. So let me see if I can get Maggie on the line.

[00:02:44] Hi, Maggie.

Maggie: [00:02:47] Hey, Jenn. Thanks for having me today.

Jenn: [00:02:49] Oh, thanks for joining me. So we have so much to talk about. First, give me the nutshell version of your kids book origin story.

Maggie: [00:02:56] Yeah, so um, I graduated college and applied for an MFA program immediately. And I was going to University San Francisco, for my MFA in writing. And I got a job at Books Inc, on Chestnut Street as a children's bookseller, like, simultaneously. And eventually I worked my way up through that company and became the children's department director for the whole chain of bookstores. So I used to run their book fairs and all of their author events for kids and teens. And I trained all the kids people in store and I was really tired all the time. And at the same time I was doing that I also interned at Chronicle Books in their children's editorial department. And I read for you, I read for Laura Rennert briefly. And I did kids book clubs, to kind of help me make ends meet. And I also did creative writing tutoring for children.

Jenn: [00:03:51] Can I just stop you there for one second, because I literally forgot that you had read for me?

Maggie: [00:03:58] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:03:59] So, that’s fun. I didn't remember that. I mean, I knew you from bookselling days before that, because I also worked at Books Inc. Anyway. So you basically were immersed. It was coming from all sides, the kids books.

Maggie: [00:04:16] And then I also worked in marketing at Chronicle Books. And then I went to Apple iBooks where I also did, I like negotiated placement in that store with all the major publishers and kids books were included in that. And I think they were kind of proud that they finally had someone on staff that could talk about kids books.

Jenn: [00:04:32] So as you mentioned, it all began with your getting an MFA in writing. So let's talk about that. Obviously, every program and every writer is different. Do you think it was useful for you?

Maggie: [00:04:43] Yeah. So sometimes I get really salty about it. And I'm like, not at all and like, that's not fair. Because my thesis advisor was Lewis Busby, who's a really wonderful middle grade author, and working with him was really meaningful for me. I will say, though, that if you are the kind of person who is a people pleaser, like, you like to satisfy what other people say you need to do, workshop may not be the best place for you. I, the reason I get kind of salty about my MFA is because I did pay a lot of money to have my own voice kind of beaten out of me for a while. Because when you're trying to satisfy so many different people who don't necessarily understand what you're trying to do, or care about kids books, or have read a kids book since *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, their critique may not actually be useful for you. But if you're a people pleaser, you're like, well, I'll figure out some way to make them happy. And instead of the kind of interesting thing that you were working on that spoke to whatever it was that you were passionate about, you get this kind of like overworked pie dough of a manuscript that doesn't really satisfy anyone anymore.

[00:06:04] So, it might have been that I was straight out of college, and I was still younger, and I still cared too much about what other people had to say. And Lewis, to his credit, even tried to warn me about that. Going into my second year of the MFA. He's like, hey, listen, this isn't a kid's MFA program, like kids literature MFA program. So a lot of people here aren't going to understand what you're doing. And so be polite in workshop, obviously, and nod and smile, but at some point, you can just ignore them. I was like, that seems wild. I will not do that. And then later, I was like, I should have done exactly that.

Jenn: [00:06:42] But then it's like, well, then why did you bother to pay all that money? Like, if you were just gonna ignore everything you're being told.

Maggie: [00:06:50] Exactly. So it was really helpful for me to learn how to give good critique, not just in writing, but in life. I learned how to be really polite about giving really difficult feedback from my MFA program. I will say that about it, like it was worth it for that. And it was worth it for a few of the friends I made there. But generally speaking, I got a much better education about writing from being a bookseller. And then talking to customers every day and talking to kids every day and talking to other booksellers about what we loved and why, and what was lighting our fire, because it was more of a reminder that not every book has to be for every person. And so your writing doesn't have to be for every person. And I got that more from being a bookseller than from getting an MFA, where I was working with poets who are trying to do weird formal things and then they get my manuscript and be like, “What the heck is this?”

Jenn: [00:07:48] Although perhaps, I mean, in a way, it leaves you better equipped to deal with editorial letters. Because I think that sometimes people think when they get an editorial letter that they have to do everything in the letter as it says.

Maggie: [00:08:09] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:08:08] But, in fact, you can often find ways around that or realize, okay, this reader was stalled here. And there's a reason why, but the solution is different or something like that. So maybe that helps.

Maggie: [00:08:18] I wish I could say that my MFA taught me that, but I think experience working with editors is what taught me that. I have to learn the hard way every time not to listen to people. Because the first time I got an editorial letter back, I was like, well, I will do all of this, even if I disagree with it. And like, I don't know, and the editor was like, you do not have to do that. These are all suggestions. And I was like, I will still do everything you've said.

[00:08:49] So I don't know maybe I'm speaking more to my personality flaws than anything, but it was a lesson I had to learn the hard way both times. The MFA program made it especially difficult because people get really fiery in workshop situations, because they'll argue with each other and be really forceful about why they think the thing that they think that they just read 10 minutes ago before class started. And I didn't have the sense of emotional distance from it to really have that kind of feedback be useful to me.

Jenn: [00:09:23] I hear you. I actually went to USF for a hot second also. And—

Maggie: [00:09:29] Oh, really.

Jenn: [00:09:29] Yeah. I took several classes, but the one that I remember most was a memoir class. And I was writing as a YA or children's book. And people were not okay with that. It was very intensely bad. And I realized that that was not for me.

Maggie: [00:09:55] Yeah, so the memoir class at USF is the opening class. That's the class everyone has to take and that's where they lump everyone in together, regardless of your interests. And that one I was fine with. But the working with people who do not write kids books, I don't know, man. Or aren't interested in it and aren't up to date on it is really just a brutal blow for somebody who's trying to write for the contemporary kids audience because people have such strong opinions about what's appropriate for kids? And what can kids handle? And they'll have those opinions, regardless of any understanding of the current market.

Jenn: [00:10:35] Right. What do you think were like your expectations versus reality, when you went into the program?

Maggie: [00:10:44] I definitely thought that getting an MFA would immediately propel me to like *New York Times* bestsellerdom, and I would feel so sure of myself as an author and then that would be it. I would get my degree, and then I would be a professional. And that would be that and then the rest would be history.

[00:11:07] Which.

Jenn: [00:11:13] In a way some of it happened.

Maggie: [00:11:16] I feel like we should all just take a moment to laugh at that idea. And, of course, it didn't work like that. And I think a lot of people pursue an MFA because they think it'll alleviate their sense of imposter syndrome and I would just like to save you $40,000 and tell you that it will not. If that's your reason for getting an MFA is that it will make you feel like you're valid. The piece of paper isn't going to do that, like that's like a deeper thing that's happening there. And getting an MFA won't solve it, but it will cost you a lot of money. So, you know, there's that.

Jenn: [00:11:56] For sure. I do think that there could be value, and maybe if you went to a kids-specific MFA.

Maggie: [00:12:03] Totally.

Jenn: [00:12:03] Which, they exist. And also, if your goal was, I just want to learn more about writing and practice my writing and become potentially a better writer and listen to brilliant people's ideas and things like that. And not, this piece of paper is going to get me published.

Maggie: [00:12:20] Yes.

Jenn: [00:12:21] Or this means that I will be successful because I have a degree in it because that’s not true.

Maggie: [00:12:25] I think that's the exactly accurate distinction to be made for, like your goals for getting an MFA. And I've heard people say, like, you're more likely to get published if you have an MFA. And I would just like to say that the alumni for my program beg to differ.

Jenn: [00:12:44] Yeah.

Maggie: [00:12:44] There’s not a ton of publication out of my school, and it wasn't a bad school. I learned good things while I was there, and I will say some of the professors I had were fabulous. But it doesn't mean… it's still a hard profession to break into and an MFA isn't going to be what clears the fence for you.

Jenn: [00:13:02] Yeah, it's definitely not a golden ticket.

Maggie: [00:13:06] No.

Jenn: [00:13:08] Are there questions that you think people should ask themselves? Or, indeed, that they should ask the schools or alumni, if they're contemplating getting an MFA?

Maggie: [00:13:12] I mean, I think they should definitely check to see if writers who they respect came out of that MFA program. Just the same way where you look for an agent, where you're like, are there people, who's representing the authors who I'm most passionate about? Who seems interested in what I'm doing? You don't want to go in and be the only one who does a certain type of thing, at least in my experience, because that was a major bummer. And really made me feel like I was doing something really wrong.

[00:13:45] So, just kind of the lay of the land. That way. Checking out the professor's work and seeing if it's work you're actually interested in. But also really asking yourself, like, what your motivation for it is, if it's because you want to talk about writing four days a week for three hours at a time, because you love it and you just want to hone your craft that way, then like maybe an MFA program is for you. But if you're looking at it, because you think it will somehow validate your interest in a profession, people tend not to take seriously until you've actually published, you think it's going to clear your imposter syndrome, if you think it's that golden ticket. Those are not good reasons to spend that much money. You can learn so much more from reading books, talking to booksellers,

Jenn: [00:14:36] Yeah, [crosstalk] get a job at a bookstore.

Maggie: [00:14:40] Highly recommend. Highly, highly recommend getting a job at a bookstore if you want to be an author. I think there's a reason why the matriculation rate of booksellers to authors, there's so many.

Jenn: [00:14:52] There’s probably a lot more than there are MFA students to authors.

Maggie: [00:14:56] You know, I haven't seen the numbers but I feel like, yeah.

Jenn: [00:15:03] So speaking of that, how has your past life as a bookseller? How does that inform your writing?

Maggie: [00:15:09] Oh my gosh, I think philosophically, it was invaluable. Because like I said earlier, as a bookseller, you really learn that not every book is for every person, and that there's the right book for the right reader, and it's your job to match them. And if you take that into your writing, and you think like, Well, I'm not writing a book for everyone, not everyone has to be happy, I'm writing a book for me, or I'm writing a book for this kid, or whoever, that sort of specificity of audience and being kind of realistic in your goals with it is so valuable, and also so freeing, because when you're trying to write a bestseller, you're not going to, firstly, and secondly…

Jenn: [00:15:52] Well, some people might, but, yeah.

Maggie: [00:15:55] Okay, sure, some people might, but the rest of us will not. And I think the amount of people who are trying explicitly to write a best seller and the amount of people who do, that fraction is pretty damning. Whereas like people who are writing for a specific audience in mind, where they have sort of a scope of audience that's realistic in their mind in place are going to have a more satisfying time being a writer. Like it's going to be a more fulfilling experience.

[00:16:24] I wrote *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea*, not because I was like this will be the one that finally displaces the *Hunger Games* as like the number one YA novel that adults read. But I was like, I hope that like, some queer kids find this book and feel like they see themselves in it. And then when that started happening, it felt like, well, I accomplished exactly what I set out for with that book. And it makes the job more satisfying. As a career, like, it makes it more fulfilling. And so that's the real gift I feel like book selling gave to me was to be… Realistic isn't the right word. It's to be like, specific in your goals.

Jenn: [00:17:07] You write across multiple categories and formats. You've got picture books, fiction, nonfiction, YA fantasy graphic novels? Some are released, some are forthcoming. Did you set out initially to be all over the map? Or how did that evolve?

Maggie: [00:17:21] Now I feel like you know better than anyone how a lost child in the woods I’ve been with my own career. I really thought I was going to be a young adult author, only when I was getting my MFA. That’s what I thought I would do. I never thought I would write a picture book. And then I wrote that picture book. I wrote *Also An Octopus* and that was the book that I queried you with and that you agreed to be my agent with and that book sold. And I was like, okay, I guess I'm a picture book author now. And so then I like only wrote picture book manuscripts for a really long time, and they were all really bad.

Jenn: [00:18:02] Not all of them sold one of them, at least.

Maggie: [00:18:10] No, but like many of them, I would say, like the amount of picture book manuscripts it takes me to write before I hit one that's good is high.

Jenn: [00:18:19] I think that's true of a lot of people. And it's something that people don't talk about. People think, oh, this person is writing so many picture books, they're genius. But like, you don't even know that there's 20 times that many in a drawer.

Maggie: [00:18:32] Oh, totally, totally, totally. I don't mean that even to be mean to myself. I just mean I wrote a lot of them and a lot of them were not right. And I think a lot of them were not right, because I was kind of forcing myself to write them. Because I was like, well, I wrote one picture book so now I'm a picture book author. So this is what I have to do. And it wasn't until I started kind of letting go and just sort of writing what I was actually passionate about at any given moment that I started having any kind of success, because there was a really long dry spell between *Also An Octopus* and my next book deal, because that sold in 2011 and I didn't sell my next book. Well, you didn't sell it, ma'am, until 2017 was when I had more books to bring to bear.

Jenn: [00:19:16] But it wasn't like we were trying and failing to sell a bunch of them either.

Maggie: [00:19:22] No, that's true. But I was trying and failing on my own in the privacy of my own home. Like I would read them and be like, this is crap.

Jenn: [00:19:29] Because you were working in your mind on a much bigger project, so.

Maggie: [00:19:33] I was. It took me eight years to write *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea,* and that was happening in that period of time. But it was because it took a lot of starts and stops and a lot of the stops were because I was like well why am I doing this? I'm a picture book author. Now I’m like—

Jenn: [00:19:50] So you were self-imposing a label on yourself.

Maggie: [00:19:56] Totally, and it was so unhelpful and so stifling. And since I kind of have let go of that I have so much more fun writing and being an author. And when one of my forthcoming books sold, it’s called *The Worst Ronin*. And now going to be with Harper but it sold to HMH before the acquisition. I was like, man, if this book sells, then that it's like official, I should just write whatever the eff I want at any given moment. Because this is such a weird book. I took so many like weird, hard lines on it, where I was like, yeah, no, it's got samarais and cell phones and I refuse to explain that. And so, ever since that sold, I have felt very free. And I hope that more authors start doing this, because I think there's a lot of advice that floats around the internet about having a brand. And being specific. And I don't know, all free writing advice is worth every penny. But I will say for me, like, not pigeonholing myself, and letting myself write what feels right has been such an open door. It’s opened everything up for me, and has made my career more fun and more satisfying. And also more successful.

Jenn: [00:21:15] Yeah, I mean, I will say, I think that a lot of times people mistake brand for like a cookie cutter kind of situation. Like they think, oh, my brand is, I'm an X, I’m a YA fantasy writer only. And so they become enmeshed in only ever writing that. And they think that that's a brand, but I don't think it is. I think you actually do have a strong author brand. It's just part of that brand is being all over the place. But I can see where these books link, I can completely see it. I understand, you know. But granted—

Maggie: [00:21:55] Yeah, you're handling the business end of my career, and thank God, right?

Jenn: [00:22:03] Yeah, but I do think if you… In the moment, you might not be able to see how they fit together. But I do think they do fit together. There's a certain, like, oddball sensibility across all your books.

Maggie: [00:22:17] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:22:17] Whether they're fantasy or horror, graphic novels or picture book, there’s… anyway [crosstalk]. Come on.

Maggie: [00:22:29] I will say the one philosophical thing that I do think joins up my work is I try to be really clear-eyed and really honest in the way that I write whatever world I'm writing. I’m not… I don't know how to say this without sounding like I'm being shady to other people, which is not at all how I intend it or how I think about it. But like, I don't have any interest in writing cutesy stories where everyone's nice. You know what I mean? And so that's maybe the thing that joins them all together is there's always a little bit of an edge. And I like to think maybe it's because I'm a pessimist. Or maybe it's because I'm a Jew. But there's something about that, that's like, to me it just feels honest. And that's the thing that I like to think makes my work cohesive.

Jenn: [00:23:16] Yeah, I can totally see it. So how do you juggle having all these different kinds of books? You're writing some, you're marketing, some, some are about to come out? Like, how do you do it?

Maggie: [00:23:28] You warned me. You, Jennifer, warned me when I was pumping out stuff. And I was like, okay, now try to sell this, now try to sell that. And you're like, yeah, we can, we can go like I'm listening to you and I hear you. And we'll do this the way you want. But maybe you want to slow down because when these books come out, you will have to work on them a lot again, and you will have other projects happening then that you may want to have bandwidth for. And I was like, Jennifer, shh. I do what I want.

[00:23:59] And then this year, for the first time, I was like, oh, I see. And so I would say like, just the same way I've been handling everything else, like a child lost in the woods, just trying to figure it out as it happens. I will say M.T. Anderson has given the advice, and I love it, that a change of pace is the same thing as taking a break. And I have found that to be very true. So sometimes when you're like… like I just turned in the edits for this sequel to *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* and those revisions were torture. They were just really difficult. Drafting that book, for me, was a complete pleasure. But revising it was really difficult. And I turned it in and then I immediately had to turn around and start promoting *Love in the Library*. And there was a moment of overwhelm in that for me. But there was also a moment where I was like, oh, this is the fun part, though. I just did all this toil, and now I get to celebrate a different book. I don't know, that felt really good and really fun once I got over the three days, where I was like, oh my god, I can't believe this.

Jenn: [00:25:05] What have I done?

Maggie: [00:25:06] What have I done to me? So I think like, it is all work. But being a writer such a weird job with like no real schedule that I'm trying to think of it in terms of there are natural ebbs and flows to my creative output. I always have periods of time where the ideas just aren't clicking right and I can't quite tell what it is that's going to be the next right project. But often those moments coincide now, with moments when I'm promoting a book. That’s like, wow, that's pretty great. That's actually very satisfying, where it's like, I don't need to be flagellating myself, that I'm not the most productive person in the world for this month, or even two months, because I've got this book to promote, and I need to go to schools and I need to hone that presentation to be as best and as powerful as is humanly possible. And so, I don't know, I don't know if that's really an answer. But I, I find that the switching is actually helpful for the productivity.

Jenn: [00:26:07] Yeah, to give people perspective about how long things take and publishing. I sold… we sold *Love in the Library* and the first Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea book on the same day.

Maggie: [00:26:18] Yes. In 2017.

Jenn: [00:26:21] *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* has been out for a while. It came out during the pandemic.

Maggie: [00:26:26] Two years, yeah.

Jenn: [00:26:29] And *Love in the Library* is coming out this week. So you know, things take time.

Maggie: [00:26:35] Takes a hot minute, and it took *Also An Octopus*… That sold in 2011 and it came out in 2016. So that was five years for that book, too. So just illustrated books in general, just take a really long time.

Jenn: [00:26:47] Yes, so true. So let's talk about *Love in the Library*, because that's actually what you're here to talk about, for the most part. So let's get into it. Why don't you tell the folks about it a little bit.

Maggie: [00:26:56] Yeah. *Love in the Library* is the true story of how my maternal grandparents met in the Japanese incarceration camp Minidoka. My grandmother Tama Inoi was the camp librarian there. And every day my grandfather, George Tokuda, would come in and check out like a billion books, he had no intention of reading so that he could go stare at her and flirt with her. And they fell in love. And they fell in love in this incredibly unlikely and horrible place that was built to make them feel less human. And they turned around and did the most human thing possible just to fall in love. They got married. And they had their first son in the camp. And so I wrote it in 2017, actually, right after President Trump took office and tried to, by executive order passed the Muslim ban. And I was not in the country at the time. But I remember being like, I have to do something. I'm so furious and scared. And I tried to evaluate my own gifts and like what I felt like I could do that might help. And I realized my family had offered this beautiful story about resilience, but also about the ugliness of those kinds of policies that would allow me to tell this story and to hopefully change some minds and help some kids not go along with that kind of legislation in the future. And so I wrote *Love in the Library* then.

Jenn: [00:28:26] So you must have grown up hearing your grandparents’ story. Was being so close to the subject matter here helpful, or did it make the writing more difficult, actually.

Maggie: [00:28:34] Yeah, kind of both. So I've known this story for as long as I can remember. I don't remember the first time I heard it. That’s how ingrained this story is in my memories of childhood. So in some ways, it made it really easy. I know the plot of this story. I don't need to, I didn't even need to fact check the plots, I know exactly how it went. But the idea of writing someone else's true story, and beyond that somebody's true story who, they're not here anymore. They can't help me. They can't answer my questions. I can't ask them if this is okay, if this is what they want, was so much pressure. And that made it really hard because I really… when you make up a story fictionally, if you mess it up, it's just on you. You're like Oopsie doopsie, I'm a little embarrassed, but life goes on. When you mess up someone else's story. It feels different. It's a lot more pressure. And so I really, I think this is the book that I have wrung my hands about the most in terms of like, did I get this right? Is this right? Is this the right tone? Is this the right feeling? Is this author note correct? Because I wanted to be very clear that both, yes, it is a romantic story, but also It happened because of incredible racism and inhumanity and to diminish that would be disrespectful to their suffering. And so I wanted to honor their joy and their suffering simultaneously. And that's a hard line to walk.

[00:30:16] And I think the illustrator Yas Imamura did such a beautiful job doing that in her work that once I saw her illustrations starting to come in, I started feeling infinitely more confident about the undertaking in general. Just because I was like, yes, this is the right tone and it's in large part, because of how she illustrated it. She walked a very fine line. And there were moments even when we had discussions between me and Karen Lotz, who’s the editor, where it was like, do you need to say that this is bad here? And I was like, well, it seems like a moment where the illustration could do that kind of lifting. And luckily, Yas was the illustrator, and she just knocked it out of the park.

Jenn: [00:31:00] Yeah. Typically, the author and illustrator are sort of kept at arm's length in the making of picture books. But because the story is so personal to you, did you have more input or consultation with Yas or anything during the making of it?

Maggie: [00:31:14] Yeah, I'm not super officially all the time. Like Karen definitely kept me in the loop on sketches. And there were some fact checking things that I did for it. But Yas was just super cool about it, and would send me sketches she had and be like, does this feel right? And I would just every single time, it was like, yes, it's amazing. You're perfect. And I love you. I think I'm starting to freak her out with like, how much I love her work on this book.

Jenn: [00:31:45] I mean, it really is perfect. So whatever.

Maggie: [00:31:49] Yeah, somebody who does that kind of exceptional, perfect, nuanced work deserves to have an author screaming at their face constantly and that is what I intend to do.

Jenn: [00:31:59] Was there anything that you didn't know about the subject that you discovered in the research that surprised you?

Maggie: [00:32:06] Hmm. Yes. That my grandparents left and came back to the camp.

Jenn: [00:32:13] What?

Maggie: [00:32:13] Yeah, so like, the government wasn't super clear about when people were allowed to leave. They weren't even like 100% like, oh yeah, we know what we're doing here. It was like a very ad hoc, absurd, stupid policy, just the way that many racist policies are. And so, George left to do work and Tama followed him at one point, but she was unable to get medical care while she was pregnant because the racism was so thick against Japanese people, that she went back to Minidoka. So he went back, too. And then eventually, he left again without her to start trying to make money and she joined him later. He was living with a friend named Bill Eng[sp?], who, this is actually this is a story I knew, but it's such a beautiful story. When George got out of the camp, he went and stayed with Bill Eng, Bill just put him up. And then he put up Tama with like, no questions asked. And at one point, before Tama got there, George was telling him like, I don't know what to do. Because of the incarceration, he lost the pharmacy he'd opened before and so his business was gone, his way of making money was gone. And he was like, I've got a kid now, we’re not going to make it like, no one's gonna hire me. I don't know what to do. And Bill went into his basement and got a bunch of money he'd been saving under a mattress. And he gave it to George and he said, pay me back when you can. And without him like our family, I don't know that we would have made it. I don't know what our family would look like without Bill Eng. And so there was, you know, I knew about that moment of kindness. But I didn't know that my both my grandparents and their baby had stayed with him. I didn't know that there was this kind of weird elastic coming and going toward the end of incarceration that was going on with the Japanese people there. And I'm still kind of unclear on it. And I think in large part because the policy was unclear. So the end of it was very unclear. The beginning of it was very clear. But the end was real hazy.

Jenn: [00:34:22] Yeah. I mean, it seems like they were making it up as they go along kind of thing.

Maggie: [00:34:24] Yeah. Yeah. And it's like a very low priority, too.

Jenn: [00:34:30] Right. Which is great. It's just cool.

Maggie: [00:34:34] People. It's just their whole lives, but take your time.

Jenn: [00:34:38] Did you ever ask your mom for feedback?

Maggie: [00:34:41] I did, I ran it by my mom a few times because one of my greatest horrors would be my mom reading it and being like, are you kidding? And she was actually one of the first people, to be really clear, one of my early drafts, she was like, This is too romantic. It’s just to romantic. Yes, this is a romantic story, but like, you got to be clear that this is bad. What happened to them was bad. And I was like, oh, yes, ma'am. Yes, ma’am. And that has become sort of the guiding principle for me in how I talk about this book is because of her feedback. My mother's a journalist. And so she was, in many ways, the absolute perfect person to get feedback from on this book. Because not only is this her parents, so she knows them better than I ever could or would. But she's also a person who's really dedicated in committing to telling the truth. And so she was really helpful.

Jenn: [00:35:40] So was there a reason that you chose to make this a picture book?

Maggie: [00:35:46] Yeah. Yeah, I wanted younger kids to read it. It's as simple as that. And I know, it's a book about grownups and people are squeamish about writing picture books about grownups for kids. It's about love and people are squeamish about writing picture books about love, romantic love, particularly. But I have known this story, like I said, for as long as I can remember, which means I probably started hearing it when I was three or four, four or five, you know, like in that picture book range. And while this might be a little bit older than that age group, it is of paramount importance to me, that we start telling kids the truth early, and that doesn't mean sitting them down every day and being like, the world is shit. And there is no hope but this story shaped my family. But in a way, it's a typically American story in the way that racist policy shapes so many families. And I think when we don't tell kids the truth about that, when we sort of obfuscate the fact that these incidents of racism, whichever one they're learning about, are not one offs, they're part of a tradition, we make it impossible for them to do better. It's impossible. If you don't understand that that's what you're coming from, there's no way you can grow up to make it better.

[00:37:11] I think sometimes, and this is where I get like a little, maybe I'm on my high horse, maybe I'm a little too intense. But I think that a lot of the coming of age you do as a teenager that makes you so angry, is in large part because people have lied to you about the nature of the world. And when you're a teenager is the first time you're like, hey, things are not fair, the world is not necessarily a good place. And the things that the government does are not necessarily the best choices. People in charge are not necessarily good people. Authority is not necessarily a good thing. And I do wonder and I do believe if we started being a little more frank with kids from a younger age, in that period of time in their teens, they wouldn't be quite so furious. They wouldn't be quite as mad at the adults around them for not telling them the truth. They'll be mad at them for other reasons, but not for lying to them.

[00:38:10] I think the lies come from a really loving place of we love our babies and we want them to be happy. And we never want to have to tell them anything hard. But I think we do them a real disservice in the long run by being squeamish about these individual moments of discomfort.

Jenn: [00:38:27] Yeah, for sure. There's been a lot of conservative pushback, obviously against uncomfortable topics in children's literature. I just got an email today that some Fox report about Scholastic and they called them woketopusses.

Maggie: [00:38:48] Okay, I know that that's not comedy, but that's comedy gold.

Jenn: [00:38:52] I laughed. And they talked about a couple of my books. And I was like, oh, thanks? Anyway. I mean, I guess any publicity is good publicity, hahaha? Anyway. Woketopus.

Maggie: [00:39:06] That’s actually my next picture book, Jenn. We’ll talk about it off the air.

Jenn: [00:39:07] Yes. Have you got any feedback from people who have read the book now and worried that maybe talking about incarceration or racism is “too upsetting” for kids? I'm putting that in air quotes, obviously.

Maggie: [00:39:20] Yes. Yes, it has happened. It has already happened quite a bit. I give a presentation to schools that goes along with this book. And I'm really frank in it. I'm not graphic, but I'm really frank about the fact that this is an American tradition. Here’s the specificity of Japanese incarceration. But you need to know that this is not the only time we've scapegoated people for being different. This is not the first time that we've had racist policies. Here are some other ones. Here's how this ties together and here's why I tell this story is because it reminds me to hope, right? Like that's the very cliff notes version of this presentation, but I cover the fact that we incarcerate children on our borders. And that particularly, telling kids that there are children incarcerated on our borders, particularly, has gotten me a lot of really bad feedback of this is too advanced for these kids, they’re not ready to have this conversation, etc.

And I recommend the *Hear My Voice / Escucha mi voz* book as my rebuttal of this is happening to kids their age. And also I'm not the first person to realize that it's important that kids in this age group know it's happening. And so here are some testimonies from those children packaged in a way that these kids can approach it. And I've been really disappointed. I’m based in the Bay Area, which is supposedly very progressive. And I have, this is from my very unscientific sort of like, personal experience presenting this book. But the whiter the school is, the more negative feedback I get. The more diverse the school is, the more the kids are equipped to talk about these things. And one of the things that I've realized is parents have to talk to their kids about the things their own community faces. We're not squeamish about that, right? Like, I've always known about Japanese incarceration. And I, as a Jew, I've always known about the Holocaust. I don't remember the first time that I learned about that either. That's just a thing that I've always known about. But I didn't know about lots of other things. And I think they're, I think that, particularly within white communities, because so much of this suffering does not touch them, they are afraid to talk about it with their children. Whereas that is the exact community that really needs to hear about it. And so I will continue to receive this bad feedback. And I will continue to tell them that, thank you for your feedback, but I will be continuing to do this. Because it's been invariably the schools that needed to hear it the most that I get the feedback from.

Jenn: [00:42:15] Yeah, that tracks. I mean.

Maggie: [00:42:18] Nobody's surprised. Every person has who probably listens to your podcast is like, yeah, that seems right.

Jenn: [00:42:27] I used to do mother daughter book clubs with very fancy people in San Francisco.

Maggie: [00:42:33] Me, too.

Jenn: [00:42:33] I found that they were really upset about things that were, I mean, I guess just they had time and energy to be very helicopter-y as parents and took objection to things that were so strange sometimes like, to me, like any child should already know this.

Maggie: [00:42:54] I mean, I can, for some of it, it's like, okay, they don't know, that's okay. You didn't have a chance to talk about it just yet. Fine. But—

Jenn: [00:43:03] Well, maybe, but also, we have to take California history in California schools.

Maggie: [00:43:08] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:43:08] And that's in it, I remember. Like, unless they change the curriculum dramatically. They should have heard it.

Maggie: [00:43:16] Which they might have.

Jenn: [00:43:15] Which they might have. It’s been a while. But anyway.

Maggie: [00:43:20] Yeah, it's bad. It's so stupid. It's so myopic. In my lower moments, I just cry and like cuss about it. Because it is one of those things where it's like, I do suspect that it's like nice white parents who are really standing in the way of this being a thing that we can just talk about. And the thing is, too. I'm not showing them graphic pictures, and videos and stuff. I'm just telling them that this happened. And I'm using accessible language to describe it.

Jenn: [00:43:57] Yeah. And I mean, children are still incarcerated. Children were incarcerated, then, like, babies were live there. What did they think, that only grownups got in trouble or put in a cage? Ugh.

Maggie: [00:44:16] I think one of the reasons why people, because I've noticed that a lot of kids will know about the Holocaust, but will not know about things that happened right here. And I think one of the reasons is because we feel like the people who did the bad things in the Holocaust got punished. Because that story is over. And so people don't mind the stories about racism, where they feel like they can distance themselves from it. But when you point out like, hey, this is still going on, and you learn about the history of racism in school, but you focus on the Civil Rights Movement, and that fight’s not over. That gives you the false impression that the fight is over and it's not. They get really uncomfortable because it's like, oh, I don't want to talk about what's going on right now because I don't know how it's gonna turn out and I also don't know how to make it any better. And so I don't want to talk about it with them. And it's like, well, I can tell you one of the things that's not going to make it better. Not to be rude, but like, come on.

Jenn: [00:45:13] So okay, I don't want people to take away here to be that this book is dark, or dangerous.

Maggie: [00:45:20] No, it’s just me. I'm just dark and dangerous. The book is lovely.

Jenn: [00:45:22] Yeah. While there is darkness by dint of the setting, there's also so much love and loveliness and hope in it. It's a really special and important book. What is your favorite spread?

Maggie: [00:45:33] It changes all the time, because Yas’s illustrations are so incredible, which I don't think that I've mentioned yet, but they're incredible. There is… so when I first got the sketches, the first page was my favorite because it was exactly the way I imagined it. And then later, my favorite spread is the two page spread where Tama’s sitting on the floor of the library, this little dinky library with not enough books in it. And around her are swirling all the things that she reads about in the book, like a big pirate ship and a knight in shining armor and a butterfly and all these beautiful, wonderful adventurous things. And that illustration is so beautiful. And then on the next page, the butterfly from her imagination, she imagines it landing on her finger. And then that became my favorite illustration.

[00:46:29] But recently, my favorite one has been when they are waiting for the train to take them to the incarceration camp. And there's a whole line of people, and they're all wearing their little tag with their number on it that identifies them. And every one of them is so specific in their humanity. Yas did just such a beautiful job of making every one of them such a full person. And beyond that, George and Tama are in separate spots in line and they're facing away from each other. But if you were to push their figures together so that they were facing each other, they would be sort of nestled into one another. And it's this little romantic sort of faded feeling of their figures amidst this horror of racist policy. That I think like, I don't know, let's just like send her bouquets and bouquets of flowers. And I keep screaming at her because it's such incredible, beautiful, subtle work. And so now that's kind of… lately, that's been my favorite.

Jenn: [00:47:34] I can see that. I had seen the art on a computer before. And I remember when I first got it, because the cover and the first page also made me freak out because it was exactly how I had imagined it. Exactly. I don't know how she did it. It was like, scary.

Maggie: [00:47:52] She's like, really good, dude.

Jenn: [00:47:56] How did you reach into my brain? Aaah. Even the font that they chose, anyway. But I just got my hardcopies today, my actual finished copies and that spread on the train was particularly striking to me for exactly the reason you say. Literally everyone you can imagine they have their own little story. I do like that.

Maggie: [00:48:17] Yeah. I'm not a teacher. But if I was, one of the assignments I would give would be to have kids write a story about what the person on that page, like, where they came from and what they're thinking. Like, just choose a figure and imagine their life. Write a little thing.

Jenn: [00:48:35] I think that's a great assignment. Teachers get on it.

Maggie: [00:48:40] Wouldn’t that be so cool.

Jenn: [00:48:40] I want to do it now.

Maggie: [00:48:42] I know! I’m not still writing fanfiction of my own picture book.

Jenn: [00:48:46] Amazing. So you mentioned way earlier in this conversation about thinking of the reader when you're writing. Who do you have an ideal reader when you write? And if so, who was it for this book?

Maggie: [00:49:05] Yeah, so like every book is different. Like I said, *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* was like queer kids who are feeling out of place in their gender assignment, that’s who *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* was for.

[00:49:18] For this one. I really wanted to write just for kids who maybe were given too narrow a slice of understanding of American history. And I count myself among them, like myself at that age probably required a much broader understanding of how racist policies shaped lots of families, not just my own. And so that's who that was for. I wrote *Squad* for angry teenage girls who feel like adults are weird about their bodies and they're furious about the fact that when they get sexually assaulted, there's nowhere to go.

Jenn: [00:50:04] But we should mention that *Squad* is about a clique of cool teenage girls who like to go to parties and lure predators, predatory dudes away from them and make out with the dudes and then eat the dudes because they're werewolves. Spoiler alert.

Maggie: [00:50:22] I'm just saying, when the regular justice system doesn't work for you, eventually the [crosstalk] becomes very appealing.

Jenn: [00:50:32] Delicious.

Maggie: [00:50:32] So it’s different audiences for different books. But yeah, so kind of all over the place.

Jenn: [00:50:42] Awesome. So now everybody is going to go get *Love in the Library* from their local independent bookstore, right? Yes. Yay.

Maggie: [00:50:48] I mean, I hope so.

Jenn: [00:50:50] Yes. And while they are shopping, you have a little kiddo yourself, and you're immersed in reading so many picture books. Do you want to rec some of your favorites that you didn't happen to write?

Maggie: [00:51:01] Oh, my God. Yes. So first of all, *Mail Duck* by Erica Sirotich.

Jenn: [00:51:05] Yes.

Maggie: [00:51:07] I give that book to every toddler now. That's like my, you get a *Mail Duck* and you get a *Mail Duck*, and you get a *Mail Duck.* It's been one of our favorite books for over a year, which for a two year old, like, impressive. Yes, thank you, Jenn. So that's been a really big hit. He likes a lot of train and things that go books that I don't necessarily share in his joy of reading them, but I will always read them with him. But *Mail Duck* is one of the ones that I love reading with him. *A Potato on a Bike*. Is that what it's called?

Jenn: [00:51:44] Yeah.

Maggie: [00:51:45] It's another one you gave me. That's another one we have a lot of fun with. And it's the reason why now when you ask him a yes or no question, and the answer is no, he goes, “No way!”

Jenn: [00:51:53] It’s cute!

Maggie: [00:51:54] It's extremely cute. And then the other one that like probably we enjoy equally is *Chu’s Day* by Neil Gaiman and Adam Rex. It's a cute story, but Adam Rex's illustrations are so rich and offer so much upon 10 bajillion rereads that it ends up being really fun for both of us because we talk about completely different things around the book because of it each time, which is very satisfying. So that's been a really fun one.

Jenn: [00:52:23] Nice.

Maggie: [00:52:23] Yeah.

Jenn: [00:52:26] Okay, Maggie, I know you have so many things going on. What is next for you?

Maggie: [00:52:30] Well, I mean, *Love in the Library* is kind of like the deal right now and then the paperback of *The Mermaid, the Witch and the Sea* comes out. So that'll be exciting because that's been kind of a long time coming. And I'm hoping new people find it so that they'll be ready for the sequel, which I have toiled over and am now extremely excited about. It's got a dragon and it's got spotted hyenas. It's really got like everything I ever wanted. So, that's very exciting for me personally. A *Les Miserables* reference. You know, good stuff. And then I think after that is *The Worst Ronin* which is the samurai book. It's like a buddy comedy about lady samurais and one of them is a dirtbag and one of them's a try hard and they kind of slay monsters, try to find revenge, try to find justice. It's like part comedy part action adventure. To me it was like dirt bag Xena Princess by way of Musashi.

Jenn: [00:53:32] But it's not coming out for a while, right? It's not this year.

Maggie: [00:53:34] Next year. Or no, maybe the year after. I don’t know anymore. What is time.

Jenn: [00:53:40] What is time, really?

Maggie: [00:53:40] I’ve started to see sketches for it now so I'm starting to get really excited about it.

Jenn: [00:53:43] Yeah. I still think we’ve got at least a year to wait for that.

Maggie: [00:53:45] Yeah, probably. All right. Fine, Jennifer. Fine with your facts. Your understanding of the publishing industry.

Jenn: [00:53:54] Anyway. All right. So as you know, at the end of every episode, we have the game of what are you obsessed with? It does not have to be bookish, but it can be and I will go first so that you have time to think of yours. I think that last year, the last podcast that I did, which was in December, I was obsessed with *Below Deck*, the Bravo TV reality show.

Maggie: [00:54:19] Right.

Jenn: [00:54:20] I still am actually. That's all I watch because I’m trash, basically. But I also have been doing Lego. So as many people might have seen in my life, I do a lot of jigsaw puzzles. Like while I'm watching terrible TV, I’ll do a jigsaw puzzle of a night. But I got the Lego bookstore for Christmas. And I was obsessed with it. At first I was scared because I've never played with Lego a day in my life. And I thought, I don't know how to do this. I don't know what this is, what? But it's better than a jigsaw puzzle because it is three dimensional and there's so cool. And they're easy enough that you can do it while you're watching trashy television. But complicated enough that you actually do have to like pay attention. And there are so many. It's just amazing how the stuff starts to exist. And I made a real live bookstore like it seemed… like it had everything. A little cash wrap, little special displays. Oh my god, it's too much. Anyway, it was so fun that I got myself the boutique hotel for my birthday.

Maggie: [00:55:28] Oh my God.

Jenn: [00:55:29] Well, the thing about the boutique hotel is it has a wine bar. It has a Art Gallery full of art. It's got a dumpster in the back with moldy croissants in it. Like, what?

Maggie: [00:55:41] Oh my God, stop. The detail.

Jenn: [00:55:42] The detail of it all. So I finished that. And now apparently the other day when I was messed up on muscle relaxers, I bought a third set. What I'm saying is—

Maggie: [00:56:01] Whost amongst us.

Jenn: [00:56:02] I will I will have to build an entire Lego house to hold my Legos is what is happening right now.

Maggie: [00:56:11] Whomst amongst us has not bought something while inebriated and gone huh. I sure have.

Jenn: [00:56:19] I mean, yeah. Anyway, so Maggie, what are you obsessed with?

Maggie: [00:56:25] Okay, so when I'm like, in a bad mood, the only thing that can really save me is just petty gossip. Not like real gossip, like not like heavy hitting stuff. But just like, my coworker did this and it was so annoying. And like, can you believe it? And you want to be like, “[Gasp], no!” and it doesn't matter. This is of no consequence, and it doesn’t. Low stakes gossip is what I want. Really low stakes gossip, that doesn't really hurt anyone. It's just about the comedy of errors of being a human being and how silly we are. And COVID has really dried up the well for me for low stakes gossip. But a few people suggested the podcast *Normal Gossip* to me. And oh my God, not only does it scratch that itch of like, this is low stakes, like nobody's gonna live or die because of this gossip. This isn't like a loose lips sink ships kind of situation. This is just petty bullshit. And that's what I want. And so each episode, somebody has called in with a like complicated gossip story. They're always like kind of sagas. And the host has a different guest on every time and the host like reads the gossip in the guest and then kind of like riff about it. And the guests are hysterical and fantastic and smart. I have to highly recommend the episode “Leave ‘em a Little Bit Broke, a Little Bit Mad” with Laci Mosley because Laci is hysterical. I was listening to the podcast in public and slapping my legs, I was laughing so hard in public, completely unashamedly. It does what you need to get that gossip thing out of your heart. And the best part is you'll never know who it's actually about. So who cares? Just enjoy, indulge in a little num num gossip? It’s fine. No one's getting hurt here. So highly, highly, highly recommend. So good.

Jenn: [00:58:34] Well, I will put that on my list immediately. Thank you.

Maggie: [00:58:37] Yeah, I know you love to gossip. So this is like, you are the first person I told about this because I was like, I need you to be in on this so that we can gossip about the gossip show together.

Jenn: [00:58:46] Yes. I mean, that's also, I read like “Am I the Asshole?” kind of things.

Maggie: [00:58:52] Oh, yeah, totally.

Jenn: [00:58:54] Because I do like that.

Maggie: [00:58:54] Like that but less hurtful, like, a lot of the “Am I the Asshole?” are really mean ones and someone's being transphobic or homophobic or cruel or something. And these will be ones where it's like, this girl in the sorority got her name embroidered way too big on the handkerchief that we all get her name embroidered on after we get married and she did it just despite this other girl in the sorority because her engagement ring was too big.

Jenn: [00:59:19] Yes.

Maggie: [00:59:19] Yes. Delicious. Give it to me.

Jenn: [00:59:24] Alright, Maggie, well, I know you have to skedaddle, so I will let you go. But thank you so much for joining me.

Maggie: [00:59:30] Thank you so much for having me, Jenn. It's always fun getting to chat with you.

Jenn: [00:59:34] Yay!

Maggie: [00:59:34] We’ll gossip later.

Jenn: [00:59:34] 100% Thanks so much to Maggie for joining me and thanks to you for listening. If you'd like your very own copy of *Love in the Library* or of any of Maggie Tokuda-Hall’s books, you can find them or order them through any independent bookstore in the US. There are links in the show notes on my website. That's at JenniferLaughran.com/literaticast. Maggie is also a prolific and funny podcaster which we forgot to even talk about. And there are links to those podcasts on the website as well. I think you'll dig them. Thanks so much for listening and see you next time.

[Literaticast theme plays.]