

Podcast: The Literaticast

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Transcription by Keffy

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

Jennifer: [00:00:06] Hi and welcome to the Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran. I'm a senior agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency and today I'm super excited to talk to one of my favorite people, David Elliott. But before David joins us, I want to open a can of worms.

[00:00:22] I mean this is probably going to piss some people off. I'm sorry, in advance, hashtag #notsorry, but okay. Here's something I noticed while going through the slush. People querying with the phrase, this is a boy book or this is a girl book, and look, I get what you mean. But if you label yourself girl book or boy book, we're probably not an ideological fit.

[00:00:45] I know that this concept is very real in publishing. Like you can see it everywhere. Books are called literally like The Very Adventur-some Activity Book For Boys or The Totally Cute and Frilly Unicorn Activity Book for Girls. But this is the kind of label I'd personally like to steer away from and to help publishing steer away from too.

[00:01:06] When I was a little girl, I did love pink and purple, but I also loved rockets and I wanted to be an astronaut. I think most boys and girls can appreciate a totally cool dinosaur or hilarious fart joke or whatever. Just as most girls and boys would benefit from reading about strong friendships and emotions.

[00:01:26] When we talk about our own books, let's not put them in a box and if we are gatekeepers, whether we're librarians or booksellers or teachers or whatever, if we're in a position to recommend books to kids or to parents, let's be aware of our language. It is super easy to say, Oh, you need a book recommendation for your kid. Is it for a boy or for a girl? I mean, listen, it's an obvious first question. I've been guilty of that too. Starting conversations in this way, like a boy or girl, how old and then you go directly to the ballerinas or pirates and I get why people do it that way, but it's so limiting.

[00:02:08] Try, "Oh, you need our book or book recommendation for your kid. What are their interests?" Or "What are some other books that

they've read and loved?" You're going to get a lot closer to what they probably want or read that way.

[00:02:21] My client, Kate Messner recently tweeted talking about books for boys and books for girls, builds artificial walls around stories and limits readers' imaginations. Let's make it a goal for the new school year to stop talking about boy books and girl books and just talk about great books for kids. I think that that's something that most of us can get behind.

[00:02:43] And a speaking of great books for kids. My guest today is in New York Times Bestselling author of picture books through YA. His books are often hilarious and sometimes poignant and always clever as heck. And his latest novel is Bull a reimagining of the myth of the minotaur with a very modern voice. I'm so pleased to introduce David Elliott.

[00:03:06] Hi David.

David: [00:03:06] Hey Jennifer. How are you?

Jennifer: [00:03:10] I'm great. So I'm going to dive right in because I have so much to ask you.

David: [00:03:14] Okay.

Jennifer: [00:03:15] So what's your deal?

David: [00:03:18] Yeah. You know, I have asked that to my therapist many, many times and he has asked it back to me. And so far there's no answer.

Jennifer: [00:03:27] Oh, okay. How about this, you're on a children's book writing podcast right now. Okay. So what led you here? I mean, besides my invitation obviously?

David: [00:03:37] Yeah. Well, you know, okay. So in a way I am kind of an accidental writer or I found it accidentally. I've always loved language and I was just thinking about this earlier this week. I'm from Ohio, just at the part of Ohio where the foothills of the Appalachians start. And my dad went to eighth grade. I don't, I never saw my dad with a book in his hand. He read the newspaper and he read fishing magazines. And my mother married my dad when she was 16. She was the Valedictorian of her class, but never got to enjoy that honor because she quit in order to marry him. The biggest mistake of her life, by the way.

[00:04:34] But my point about all that is that though my parents, you would never say that I grew up in a literary household. Linguistically, it was very rich. My dad had 13 brothers and sisters, my well 12 brothers and sisters, he was one of 13. And they were all storytellers and they were all gigantic liars. And you know, I'd never heard my dad, for example, say thank you. He always said much obliged and a cup of coffee. I don't know if I ever heard him ever say coffee. It was always a cup of mud and it was always like this, "Hey, wifey, Jennifer's here, get her a cup of mud." So I grew up listening to that language and even my mother had her own way of speaking.

[00:05:36] My mom died a couple of years ago. She was 93 and worked like a dog her entire life, but even in her 90s, she still had this language thing going. For example, I would call her up and say, "Hey mom, what's going on?" And she would say, "Oh, David I am as slow as Job's turkey."

[00:05:58] So—

Jennifer: [00:05:58] What is—

David: [00:05:59] Yeah. That, and plus I attended a Baptist church. I was forced to attend a Baptist church, I might say for the first younger years of my life. And I think the combination of listening to those sort of fire and brimstone services, which are also very rich linguistically and the hymn singing. I'm still a really good hymn singer. And the language I heard at home and from my family.

Jennifer: [00:06:32] I am told that you had a lot of weird jobs.

David: [00:06:36] Oh yes. I may be the only person you know, that has both been a cucumber washer in Greece, which by the way is the most Freudian job. I never understood Freud until I washed cucumbers for the 10 hours a day. I've also been a popsicle stick maker in Israel. I did... I traveled a lot in my younger years and often with no money. And so I found myself in those situations. So, then when I was in my early thirties, and I was studying classical voice at New England Conservatory, I wanted to be an opera singer. But I decided that the world did not need one more mediocre tenor, which is torture if you've heard them. So I quit. And about that time I met my wife and thank God. As someone said to me on the day we got married, somebody whispered into my ear, that is the smartest thing you have ever done.

[00:07:43] And that's right. That person was completely right.

Jennifer: [00:07:46] Do you think that your background in music was helpful in terms of writing? Like do you think that an ear for music is akin to an ear for comedy beats or Poetic Rhythm?

David: [00:07:57] You know, I don't know for sure, but I think it is. I am really interested in the way language sounds. And so I read everything I write aloud because I want to hear the rhythm of it. I want to hear the way the consonants and vowels come up against each other. And I really hope, for example, that people read my books with the picture books and Bull and the novels aloud. They're really meant, as far as I'm concerned, they're really meant to be read aloud. So yes, my ear... there are a lot of things about me that are not great. But my ear is pretty good, I think.

Jennifer: [00:08:43] I mean, I have to say, I think that the reading aloud thing is so important. I mean, I often recommend to my authors that they either read it aloud or cause somebody to read it to them aloud. And then when I'm really excited about a book, I know because I want to read it aloud. So when I read Bull, I read it aloud to myself, to my dog.

David: [00:09:06] Oh, that makes me so happy! Both for you and your dog, I guess.

Jennifer: [00:09:09] It's true. I mean some things demand to be read aloud and I feel like that's when I know that something's really special is when I want to read it aloud, and...

David: [00:09:22] Well, thanks for saying that. Thank you. I'm glad at least that that part of the book came through because I... Originally that myth, for example, Bull, was told and not written. And so it had its birth in the ear and in the mouth. And so part of the fun for me in writing the book was to kind of have that in mind when I was working on it.

Jennifer: [00:09:49] Well, okay, I'll make a confession, which is—

David: [00:09:52] Oh good! I hope it's a juicy one.

Jennifer: [00:09:56] While I did love Bull, I don't always get novels in verse. Like sometimes I feel like they're cheating or something. I don't know. Can you talk to me about novels in verse, like, what made you choose this form, and...?

David: [00:10:08] Oh, you're gonna make me say something I don't want to say, but that's the story of my life. That's what's got me where I am today or where I am not today.

[00:10:19] First of all, if I'm really honest, I share that feeling about many novels in verse. There are many, many wonderful ones. Don't get me wrong. When they are good, what they do is help us understand the possibilities of our language because they allow... I guess all writing does this, but I think verse especially does it. They first of all bring forward its rhythms, and the possibility of its rhythms and how rhythm can carry meaning. They maybe have a little bit more license in terms of not always denotative meanings, but connotative meanings as well. And I know that, again, I know this is true for all writing, but I think poetry really essentializes what our language is. And by our language in this case, I mean English, what the language we speak is, our birthright and the wonderful gift we have of that language.

[00:11:36] So... and in fact, the Wall Street Journal, I think it was the Wall Street Journal, just this week, has an article on why reading poetry is good for kids. So, and it mentioned some of those things.

[00:11:51] In terms of Bull. You know, I don't know if it's a novel, but I know it's in verse. So it may not be the best verse, but I know that, that it can come under that category because I—

Jennifer: [00:12:06] It actually reminds me, I mean, I studied theater in high school and college. That's my background and it reminds me of a play, really, or something. Like it reminds me of monologues.

David: [00:12:21] Yeah. Well there's been... It's nice to hear you say that because a lot of the, a lot of the reviews have mentioned that they would love to see it staged and believe me, nobody would love to see it, more staged than I would, but... And there has been some interest from outside the book world and from the theater world in the book. So I would love to see that.

Jennifer: [00:12:47] Uh-huh. Why Poseidon as narrator? Like, or as sort of... I guess there are multiple points of view, but...

David: [00:12:56] Yeah. Well, you know, increasingly, in my writing life... What I'm gonna say might sound strange, but I'm trying to remove myself from the equation as much as possible. So the reason I answered your question in that way is because I didn't really decide... Oh, I hate this kind of talk, too, but forgive me. I didn't really decide that Poseidon was going to be the narrator. It seems, it feels to me as if Poseidon decided.

Jennifer: [00:13:37] Oh. Really David?

David: [00:13:39] Again, I kind of hate that kind of, oh brother. If I were listening to this, I would either be turning it off or saying, okay, I'm never going to

read a David Elliot book again. But that's really sort of how I'm feeling about it. So I had that... there's a little prologue, that begins this way. The prologue is just 11 lines and it's this.

[00:14:03] There beneath the palace walls, the monster rages, foams, bawls, calling out again and again, mother, mother, no other sound, but the scrape of horn on stone, the grinding cranch of human bone under calloused human foot.

[00:14:23] So I had that in my head for probably five years or so. And I knew it was about that myth. I've always loved that myth, but I, and I knew I wanted to write about that story. But I could not get any... I had no entrance into the rest of the story. I just had that. And every time I tried to do it, I just, I sat there looking like an orangutan at the typewriter, no offense to orangutans.

[00:14:56] But then one day I don't know how else to explain it. Just I heard, I don't even remember what I was doing. I might've been walking the dog or doing the dishes, rarely, or just in my, in a normal day to day life. And I heard those first two words that Poseidon says, "What up bitches." And I knew then that I had a way into the book and I knew that Poseidon was going to be the one who was in control of the story.

Jennifer:

[00:15:36] Have you heard from teen readers? Like I can imagine this being done in classrooms and stuff like that, like kids being really excited to read these poems aloud because of the cursing and the crazy descriptions of things.

David:

[00:15:50] You know, I haven't really heard from teens. Nobody's identified herself or himself as a teen. But I will say about the cursing... that's what Poseidon said. I didn't say it. Again, it sounds so like, oh, get over yourself.

[00:16:10] But as I worked on the book and I realized that Poseidon was going to be profane, first of all, as I was reading it occurred to me that the book is really Greek. By which I mean it's not Christian. And so the idea of, you know, that's probably gonna like kill the sales of the book right there. But what I mean by that is the values in the book are not necessarily turn the other cheek, for example. They are much more values that will have come out of the myths. And so... those myths are harsh. The gods are harsh and the humans living through those myths can be very harsh. And so I didn't... I wasn't really trying to attract teens or I hope I never find myself in the position where I'm pandering to teens.

Jennifer: [00:17:12] Well, I wouldn't think that, but I mean, I just think that the very nature of those stories, it's so dramatic and I mean there's so much bloodthirsty... that it's not you. I'm not talking about the David Elliot book. I'm talking about Greek stories, tragedies in general, are so rife with things that kids would love to read about, you know?

David: [00:17:36] Yeah, that's true.

Jennifer: [00:17:37] I did, anyway.

David: [00:17:38] Yeah, me too. And also, kids, even older kids, even though we teach them and they should learn to understand that life is not black and white. I mean that is the most immature kind of thinking, which is possibly what's gotten into our current political situation. But we're born, I think, coming in initially we have a very Roman sense of justice. And so I think part of the appeal of those myths is that if you cross the gods, you are going to get it. You can't get away with stuff.

Jennifer: [00:18:22] So I... you've heard me rhapsodize about your books enough in our relationship. So I'm not going to fluff you up too much here, but I will say you have so many different kinds of books. You're all over the place, picture books, you've got funny picture books, poetic kind of picture books, middle grade, and now teen novels in verse. How do you decide what to work on? In other words, do you feel like you're on a trajectory of some kind? Do you plan or do you just kind of do what you're feeling in the moment?

David: [00:18:51] Well, I think both those things are true. It may... often feels like this is what I'm doing in the moment, but I think as.... Well, this is more than you or your readers want to know. But I did, many years ago a five-year Jungian analysis, which completely changed my life and I know from that analysis that there is so much of ourselves that we, that is operating and living and alive that we don't know.

[00:19:31] And so I think the trajectory is something that may not be conscious and it may feel like, oh, this is what I feel like doing right now. But of course, there are reasons for that as I move on into my life and get older. You know, I'm thinking about different things for one thing.

Jennifer: [00:19:52] Fair enough. I promised a listener that I would ask you about the Orc series. Can you talk about how that came about?

David: [00:19:58] Yeah. I have a writer friend who is a teacher, and he told me that one of his students was writing, was trying to write a Clan of the Cave Bear kind of novel. And it started this way. "Ugh," said Throg. "I'll search for wife going." It still makes me laugh. And so then I thought, oh,

okay, I'm gonna take that crazy talk and try to write a kid's book about it. So that's really how it got started.

Jennifer: [00:20:46] What are you working now?

David: [00:20:48] Well, you know, this kind of goes back, Jennifer to your question about do I decide to work on things or is that on a trajectory? So once I finished Bull, my wonderful editor, Kate O'Sullivan, said, "What are you going to do next?"

[00:21:13] And I was still not over the writing in verse part. So I said, okay, I'm going to take one of my favorite fairytales which is The Seventh Raven and do that. And I started that and I was about 40 pages into it and one night I woke up and my memory is that I sat up in bed, like one of those dramatic epiphanal moments in the middle of the night. That is not what happened, but that's sort of what it felt like. And I was thinking Joan of Arc. That's all I was thinking, just Joan of Arc. And I can't even say it was thinking it was just in my head. So right then I knew to set aside the fairy tale, even though I knew nothing about Joan of Arc beyond, she was burned at the stake, but I didn't know really why exactly. I mean, I knew people said she was a witch, but I didn't know. And I didn't really know anything about her except that.

[00:22:17] So now I am working on a... I don't think I have to talk to Kate about this, but it's really feels more to me like a biography in verse. I'm trying to use again because I think if you say something is in verse, it needs to be in verse. And by that I don't just mean formal verse, but I like formal verse. So I'm trying to use all medieval forms in telling the story. So these are forms that Joan of Arc might have heard through songs or through the troubadours and that kind of thing.

Jennifer: [00:23:00] So I'm going to change topics. We're going to get off your books, although as much as I love them. We were on faculty together at the Cape Cod Workshop last year and we're doing it again this year.

David: [00:23:12] I know, I'm looking forward.

Jennifer: [00:23:14] And for those who do not know, in this workshop environment, writers are in small groups with a mentor and their work gets critiqued. And then they have time to implement the feedback and then they get to come back again and show their work again. And the writers in your group were obsessed with you as a mentor. So what are your top tips for giving useful feedback to a writer and also for getting useful feedback?

David: [00:23:40] Yeah, well let's start in the reverse. I'll talk about getting useful feedback. I mentioned my wife earlier. I'm still madly in love with her. She's not only really funny and kind, but also really, really smart and the bad part of being smart is she's also really honest. So she's one of my readers and there are only two times when I want to strangle her. One is when I'm driving and the other is when she's giving me feedback on my work.

[00:24:18] But I try to... partly because 99% of the time she is right. But I try to follow advice that somebody gave me years and years ago, not... long before I ever thought about being a writer, but about life in general. And this is what it is. He said, whenever I receive feedback, whenever I receive criticism, I try to take it as completely 100% true for 24 hours.

Jennifer: [00:24:57] Mm-hmm.

David: [00:24:58] And I think that's very good advice, both for life and for writers because, um, you know, it's hard to get... what you want is for people to say, "Oh my God, you're the smartest thing ever. You're the best writer ever. We love you." But they don't always say that, at least to me. And the defense is... writing it's an intimate thing and giving feedback and getting feedback is an intimate thing. Because if you've written honestly, which is hard to do, your psyche is exposed and you of course feel very vulnerable, because you're trying to get it right and you're trying to say something that's true and all of that. And so if somebody says, "Hmm, maybe not," You know, it can hurt. So, but it's... so the first thing is to be defensive and to say, "Well, what I was trying to do is..." "Oh no, you're dumb," or all those things.

[00:26:17] But I've really found it best not to say anything and just to take it all in. And if I let it sink in long enough, almost always, maybe the thing wasn't 100% accurate, what the person giving you feedback said is, or what your editor said is. But almost always there's something in there that can make the work better and that can make you a better writer, which is what you want because you want to hear what a great writer you are.

[00:26:50] So that is my best advice about taking that feedback. And also I have kind of harsher advice, more like Poseidon Advice, which is: look, you don't want to hear the truth, don't put it out there. I've done a lot of teaching. I teach now in Leslie's MFA program and I think what I try to do... I try to do two things. One thing is I always began by saying, I don't have any answers for you. Only you. Only the writer really knows the answers. And I think that's true.

[00:27:33] I guess what I try to do is understand that is not my work. It is not coming from my psyche. It is not coming from my unconscious. It is coming from the other person's place. They're trying to do something, they're trying to get a story out. And it's my job to respect that. And again, it's very intimate and in a way it's kind of sacred because the person is revealing, if they're honest, something very deep and I should be responding from that same place and respecting that. So I try to get that across.

[00:28:15] And then the other thing I try to do is, as writers, we love to take ourselves seriously. But, I've lived a lot in third world countries and my wife is the Refugee Coordinator for the state of New Hampshire. And through her we've heard many, many harrowing tales of survival and resistance. And let's face it, even if somebody says to you, this is a piece of crap, you're not bleeding, nobody's going to die from that. So I try to also infuse a sense of perspective about it.

Jennifer: [00:29:03] Yeah. I think that's super important. I mean, I love children's books and I really think they can change lives and, and everything, but we're not curing cancer here.

David: [00:29:14] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:29:17] It's okay to just relax a little bit.

David: [00:29:18] Yeah. Right, right. And also to get out of the way and have a little faith in the story you're trying to tell. The writer is not the important one. It's not the important part of the equation. The writer should be just the scribe as far as I'm concerned and get out of the way so that the story that wants to tell itself to you can be heard.

Jennifer: [00:29:44] Okay. So what is a great book, not your own, that you'd like to recommend that people read.

David: [00:29:55] Here is a book and a writer that I love that I think not many people know. The writer is David Malouf, M, as in Mary, A-L-O-U-F. He's Australian.

[00:30:09] And the novel, one of his novels that I love is a novel called Ransom. Without an E, R-A-N-S-O-M. And what he does is take that moment in the Iliad when Priam comes out of Troy to get the body of his son Hector, whom Achilles is basically mutilating because Hector has killed Achilles best friend Patroclus. I love that book so much because, David Malouf's imagination is so rich and expansive. And his sent—and he's able to articulate that imagination into the most lyrical, wonderful language. So, as highfalutin as that book sounds, you know what? I am

lowfalutin of all the people I know. It's really true. It isn't highfalutin at all. It is a beautiful book.

[00:31:31] And from a kid's book, I love all the Roald Dahl books because they're so subversive and they seem to care not at all about the adults who are reading the book, but really focus on the children.

[00:31:46] But I also love Tuck Everlasting, Natalie Babbitt's book. I love... structurally, I think it's brilliant. There's a symbol of the circle in that book and the book is structured as a circle. You're on the road entering Tree Gap at the beginning. You're on the road out of Tree Gap at the end. But I also love it because I really think... You know, I read somewhere that I think it was Lewis Carroll who said fairy tales are a love gift. And I never really understood that until I read a Tuck Everlasting because I don't think it's a spoiler to say that Winnie Foster, the protagonist dies in the book. Dies as a happy adult, a well, long-lived adult, although we know, her as a child. And so the book is about what my friend, the writer Bill [Lychack?] calls the only topic, the circle of life, I guess. That I really think the book is a masterpiece because it meets the reader and adult readers as well as children readers, wherever the reader is in her life. So I could say much, much more about that, but I won't. But if you haven't read Tuck Everlasting, to all you podcast listeners, you know...

Jennifer: [00:33:16] Do it.

David: [00:33:17] Do it, do it now.

Jennifer: [00:33:19] So now we've talked so long and I need to stop, but before I do, every week I ask my guests about what they are obsessed with this week. It does not have to be bookish and I will tell you mine.

David: [00:33:38] Okay, what's yours?

Jennifer: [00:33:40] Mine is absolutely not bookish. It is this TV series that I've been watching, it's on Hulu, but it actually first came from NBC, I guess. It came out last fall. I'm just behind the times. It's called The Good Place and it's got Kristen Bell who was also Veronica Mars, some people will remember. She is a woman who has recently died and Ted Danson is a sort of mentor when she gets to the afterlife. The show is so weird and crazy and funny and refreshing. It's like a sitcom fantasy mashup. I was hesitant to try it because I don't know why... I thought it would be like George Burns or something. I don't know. I find that it's so totally delightful and it's been renewed for season two and I'm into it. So it will almost certainly get canceled because it's too weird. It's too weird to be

alive. Like it's too weird to be on TV. I can't believe it's successful, but apparently it is. So. Yay. And we'll see.

David: [00:34:41] What's the title again?

Jennifer: [00:34:46] It's called The Good Place.

David: [00:34:47] The Good Place.

Jennifer: [00:34:49] Yeah.

David: [00:34:49] I'm gonna check it out.

Jennifer: [00:34:50] She's not gone to heaven. They don't call it heaven. There's no God as we know him or them or her. It's... there's a good place and a bad place and she's in the good place or is she?

David: [00:35:08] Yeah, I'm gonna check it out. It sounds great.

Jennifer: [00:35:11] And also the episodes are short, which I appreciate.

David: [00:35:14] Uh Huh.

Jennifer: [00:35:16] Okay. So what are you obsessed with this week?

David: [00:35:19] Besides food you mean?

Jennifer: [00:35:21] You could be food?

David: [00:35:23] Yeah. Well, this is kind of food... I am right now. I am obsessed with my tomatoes. I live in the country and I'm a very indolent gardener. But I try every year and every year my tomatoes get blight. And so for several years I haven't planted them, but this year they did not get blight and they're loaded with big, beautiful heirloom tomatoes that won't turn red. It's driving me insane.

Jennifer: [00:35:56] I know! Okay, this literally is happening to me right now. So every year my blight, my tomatoes get blossom end rot or something terrible. This year they're there. They exist. They are whole. They're beautiful seeming except for they're still green. They won't.

David: [00:36:14] Okay. We have to keep in touch.

Jennifer: [00:36:17] What is going on?

David: [00:36:19] I don't know.

Jennifer: [00:36:21] I blame Trump.

David: [00:36:23] Yeah. Absolutely.

Jennifer: [00:36:25] Alright, well on that note, it's been so lovely to chat with you.

David: [00:36:30] Thanks so much, Jennifer, for giving me the opportunity to allow my narcissism it's full expansive range.

Jennifer: [00:36:42] And I'll see you soon in Cape Cod.

David: [00:36:46] I am so looking forward to that.

Jennifer: [00:36:50] Thanks so much to David Elliot for joining me and thanks to you lovely listeners. This podcast has a Patreon. That's Patreon.com/literaticast. Throw in a buck and you may win books. Plus you'll get a sneak peek at upcoming guests and have the chance to ask questions. I'm putting links to the books we mentioned in the show notes on the website, and that's about it for this week. See you next time.

[00:37:16] Literaticast theme music plays.