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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 and I'm a senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency. Today I'm so excited to talk about nonfiction YA and my favorite founding father, but before we get to that...

[00:00:19] People ask me all the time, what are things you like to see in an author? Or what is your ideal author like? And I mean look, all authors are different. One way of working is not going to be right for everyone. That said, I do personally have two big important qualities, I look for that I hope that all the authors that I work with will have at least in some measure.

[00:00:41] First of all, one of the most important qualities to me for my authors or in fact for anyone that I work with or I'm even friends with in any capacity, is being a good communicator. I try my best to be quick and transparent and I hope and expect that my authors will similarly respond to me quickly, ask me questions when they have them. Tell me when there's a problem. A lot of the questions I get in the ask the agent Tumblr would be resolved so quickly if the person writing would simply talk to their agent.

[00:01:12] It's like the Facts of Life song that people who were alive in the '80s might remember. If you hear it from your brother, better clear it with your mother. Many of the myths that circulate amongst authors are just wrong. Much of the so-called wisdom out there is actually old news or fake news. So if you do have an agent, talk to them, but rather than bottling it up or getting info from dubious sources, friends of friends, Internet forums or what have you.

[00:01:38] The other thing, of course, is your agent can't help you if they don't know you have a problem. They aren't psychic but they often can and do clear up misunderstandings and problems quite handily once they know they exist.

[00:01:49] The second quality that super important to me is flexibility. I don't mean like yogagly, I mean the ability to roll with the punches. Think of creative ways to approach material that isn't working, being willing to let go of a story or edit it or put it on the back burner and try something new. Being willing and able to say yes to fascinating opportunities when they present themselves.

[00:02:10] I'm not saying you shouldn't stick to your guns or that you shouldn't tell the story you want to tell or that you should just give up on things. I'm saying that the authors of mine that have had by far the most success are the ones who are willing to rework something when an isn't working or let it go and try something completely different. And who aren't so wedded to one idea or one way of doing things that they can never be budged out of that rut.

[00:02:34] Authors who make a career of this tend to have a lot of different irons in the fire and a healthy dose of hustle.

[00:02:42] And an amazing author who exemplifies this just happens to be my guest today. Martha Brokenbrough is the author of numerous books for all ages. New this month, she has two books. Love Santa is a book for younger readers and nonfiction YA that happens to be a biography of the \$10 founding father Alexander Hamilton, Revolutionary.

[00:03:07] Let me see if I can get Martha on the line.

[00:03:13] Hi Martha.

Martha: [00:03:14] It's so good to talk to you.

Jennifer: [00:03:18] let's get right into it because I have so much to ask you about. You have written picture books, YA novels, fiction and nonfiction, and a lot of others feel that you have to have a brand. You hear it all the time, and I hate that term, but I think you know what I mean. Has anyone ever urged you to brand yourself?

Martha: [00:03:38] Like a cow? No. I have gone to lots of SCBWI conferences and other things and been party to discussions where people talk about the value of a brand and I get it. I mean, we all understand what a Disney movie is going to be like. That said, it doesn't really work for me. I've done a lot of things. I've been a teacher, I've been a journalist, I've worked writing questions for game companies.

[00:04:03] I'm really curious about a lot of things in the world and the books that I write are the ones that I really, really want to write and truly

love. And so my, my sleazy little answer is I try to make every book I write excellent. And if excellence isn't a brand, then the world is in real trouble.

Jennifer: [00:04:23] What is it been like for you to bounce around categories? Do you have a strategy when you do it or do you just sort of do what you love in the moment?

Martha: [00:04:29] I mostly do what I love in the moment. You never know when the perfect idea for a picture book is going to hit and when it hits, you should write it and not save it for some other time in your schedule. Also, opportunities come up all the time and when you can say yes to something great, you should say yes to something great.

[00:04:53] And I also like to keep moving and so if I'm stuck on a project then I'll pick up something else. And very often that is the thing that gets me unstuck, is unclenching my mind on the problem that was dogging me. And so this is just my way of keeping moving. Other people have different ways, but it seems to work so far.

Jennifer: [00:05:16] Do you work on more than one project at a time? Like simultaneously.

Martha: [00:05:21] Not literally more than one at a time because I just have the one keyboard. But it is... on a day like today... So I teach in the Writing for Children and Young Adults Program at Vermont College of Fine Arts. And so this is what we call packet week. It's the week that I'm giving feedback to all of my students. And so that's the bulk of my work during the day.

[00:05:43] But I also have another nonfiction book that I'm researching. And so I've set aside time just to read some stuff and to take some notes. And also on my to do list for this week is to make a little more progress on the novel that I'm working on. And it's really about saying, okay, I have this much time and here's how I'm going to fill it. As opposed to waiting for inspiration to hit and waiting for conditions to be perfect is you just look at the time you've got and then you kick your own rear end and get going.

Jennifer: [00:06:16] Is there a way that is different in how you approach writing fiction versus nonfiction?

Martha: [00:06:22] Well, nonfiction is, for me, in some ways quite a bit different. So let's say you've got an Alexander Hamilton. We pretty much already know what happened at the end of his life. But let's say it's more like Finding Bigfoot or Shark Week, which are two other nonfiction books

that I've written. Those books I could have structured any way I wanted because they're not narrative. And so that I'm trying to think of what's going to be the most appealing and compelling. And that, interestingly enough, is the most like writing fiction.

[00:07:00] Character is who the story is about. Plot is what's happens. Structure is how you reveal that. So a movie like Memento, the structure was entirely in reverse and that became the most interesting and fascinating way of showing who that character was and what that story was about. A book, like All the Light We Cannot See is also nonlinear. And the way that the timeline is broken up makes it more interesting. And I think that's what writers are really trying to do, is we want people to keep turning pages and what's the most interesting way we can do that?

[00:07:36] That's the challenge of writing a book and that's the fun of it.

Jennifer: [00:07:39] So let's, as you brought up Hamilton, so let's get into Hamilton.

Martha: [00:07:44] Yes, yes.

Jennifer: [00:07:46] So, this book. I am so happy that the publisher sent me a copy because it's absolutely gorgeous. But before we get into how it was made, can you tell me about how it started? Did the publisher Jean Feiwel approach you to write a Hamilton book after the musical came out or did you propose it or what?

Martha: [00:08:02] You know what? I wished that I had been the genius who proposed it, but that was all Jean Feiwel. She and I worked together on two other books and we had a great time doing it. And we sort of have this deal now where if she has an idea that feels right for me, or if I have an idea that feels right for her, then we both talk about it together because she is an incredible and just savvy and sharp editor. And so she asked me, hey, are you interested in writing this book? And, I of course said yes because who isn't interested in Hamilton? I mean, especially after seeing that incredibly brilliant and amazing musical. And so what we decided to do together, there is no young adult version of Hamilton. There are lots of middle grades, there are some picture books, there's nothing yet for this category.

[00:08:54] And what's really interesting about the young adult category is that, you know, there is nothing off the table. I could write about his extra-marital affairs. I could dive deep into the complexities of drafting the constitution and getting it ratified. It's not going to be over the

audience's head. And I think we also all know that there's plenty of crossover appeal with young adult titles. There's crossover appeal with all good books, but particularly young adult.

[00:09:26] A lot of people are really drawn to the category because these books are such pleasures to read even when you're no longer in that age group. And so we wanted to definitely break ground with this book and we also... and I don't even know whose idea this was or whose language this was, but we wanted to create a beautiful object. And that's why the book has incredible design. That's why it's lavishly embossed with metallic ink. Why all of those images were licensed.

Jennifer: [00:10:02] Yeah, it's really special. How big a hand or did you have in the design of it or packaging of it?

Martha: [00:10:11] Well, so that was really Jean and Raphael Jerone[?] who's the designer of the book. I wanted it to be beautiful and I found the images that we wanted to use. And every once in a while I would send along things that I had found, like, this ended up not making it in the book, but Hamilton had a special book plate and I want to have some reproductions of these made because a book that's in Hamilton's library had a plate that looked like this. How cool is that?

[00:10:41] I was also really excited when I found the wedding ring that Alexander gave to Eliza. It's this absolutely striking ring. It's called a gimmel ring and it splits open it, it swivels on a little hinge and on the inside of it is written their names and the year they were married and she wore that thing for 72 years. And it's just little stuff like that that made them feel so much like people to me. And I also really loved how romantic that ring was. That shows how romantic Alexander Hamilton was, and this is what, to me, makes history so absolutely enthralling and powerful. It's not the dates, it's not the battles. It's not all that stuff that we were, if we're fed in school, it's that they were people living in a time where some things were different and many things were the same. And how can we make them live again, even if only on the page.

Jennifer: [00:11:42] What kind of research did you do? Did you go to Hamilton's house? Did you, what did you do to...

Martha: [00:11:49] I did go to Hamilton's house. It's in Harlem. It's been moved a couple of times. I didn't get in because it was being fumigated for bedbugs. So, I did have a friend who goes through and take a video tour once those pesky things had been eradicated. But, you know, I went to DC, I went to New York. I didn't get to go to the Caribbean. I didn't get to go to Philadelphia. But I read lots of books and I searched through lots

and lots of archival material. In addition to the stuff I discovered in books, you know, anything else that I could find. And in doing that, I also hired a PhD History graduate student.

[00:12:37] One of the things about this book is I had to turn it around pretty quickly, in order to frankly be the first to the market with a young adult Hamilton book. And so, my research assistant, Nicole Vandermeer, graduate student, she's been given awards by the Gilder Lehrman Society, which holds some of Alexander's papers. She was incredible.

[00:13:01] I could tell her, hey, you know, what did the wharf look like when Alexander arrived in New York as a teenager? What did that wharf look like? What did he step off into? And so she found me maps, she found me an archeological dig, you know, that listed things that had been buried in the muck since that time, you know, boots and shards of pottery and bottles of alcohol. And it's just those concrete details made it seem more real and also made it as accurate as I could possibly get it.

Jennifer: [00:13:31] Okay. I'm a big Hamilton nerd. I've read a lot of different accounts of his life and death and I've seen the musical 10 times. But I'm still here for Hamilton Fun Facts. Can you give me some of the best things you learned or great a Ham story?

Martha: [00:13:48] There are so many stories that I really loved. One of them, and I can't remember if this was in the Chernow book or not, but there is a battle and it went badly for the Americans and it was smoky and it was hot. And after the smoke finally cleared, Alexander Hamilton and the rest of Washington's aides, they found a dog that had wandered across enemy lines and they checked the collar of the dog. And the tag indicated that this dog belonged to the British general. And so in Alexander's handwriting is this note with a few cross outs, you can tell he was really tired. His handwriting was usually impeccable. But this note was sloppy and had crossouts and it essentially said, "Hey general, we've got your dog, we're sending him back."

[00:14:40] And there's so much that I loved about that. I'm a dog person. And so, pretty much you put a dog in a book, especially if the dog doesn't die. And I'm going to be really happy. But they didn't need to get the enemy's dog back. And they did. And it was a reminder to me that the British and the Americans were enemies, but they were also countrymen. I mean, this was a civil war. It's called the revolution because from our perspective the Americans won. But it was essentially a civil war and you know, they were treating each other like human beings and, and returning this poor scared dog to his dad. And I really liked that.

Jennifer: [00:15:20] Is there anything that drives you crazy that you think people get really wrong about Alexander Hamilton?

Martha: [00:15:27] Well, nothing drives me crazy when people get stuff wrong because, gosh, there's a lot to know. And how do you know what you know, and everything. I do think that the musical makes it seem as though his relationship with Angelica was somewhat different than it was. For sure, they loved each other. For sure, they were attracted to each other, but they didn't have an affair. And Angelica didn't hand Alexander over to Eliza. She was already married. And so that was dramatized for effect and it was a great effect. But that's not exactly how it happened.

[00:16:02] Another thing, and this was one of the things that I wanted to contribute with this book and this point of view. One of the things that most struck me about Alexander and why he made some of the decisions he made. So he was an orphan, essentially. His own father abandoned him. His mom died. And this, his mom who was called a whore and all sorts of other names. This guy wanted to be loved. He wanted to be a hero. He wanted to prove himself. And we know that there's many, many kinds of love.

[00:16:38] Well, in a letter that he wrote to a woman who basically gave him the Heisman, she said, I pretty much don't want to date you. He wrote her this four-page letter explaining that it was all right and it's the sweetest letter. I actually had it scanned and this was the first time it's ever been scanned. Because the handwriting is just perfect. He took so much time with it and he explained to her in this letter that his motto was all for love.

[00:17:06] And I started thinking about that and you know, again, the many forms of love and started thinking about why on earth he would consent to a duel with Aaron Burr. It wasn't worth it. And some people say, oh, you know, he's trying to restore his political image. He wanted to get back into politics again. His political career was over part of my book and the conclusion of this book is the role that love had in his decision. And I wish people gave him and love more credit for being the most powerful force on earth. It's not so that he could be a politician again. It was to make himself worthy of love.

Jennifer: [00:17:46] Oh, Alexander.

Martha: [00:17:48] I know.

Jennifer: [00:17:51] So, I can't stress again how big an A. Ham fan I am. So this is not a dig, but it does seem to me as if publishing in the wake of the musical is making a bit of a cottage industry out of Hamilton related novels. I have noticed at least like four YA, not not nonfiction books, but novels about Alexander and his various friends and lovers. Have you had the chance to read any of these?

Martha: [00:18:24] I have not yet had the chance to read any of them. And the reason I got so far behind on my regular reading with my Hamilton research, cause there is a ton of stuff out there. And so I've been playing catch up. 2016 in the year of books is still very new to me. I guess my thinking on it is people can read what they want, publishers can publish what they want. I'm really super proud to have told the true story of his life as well as I can. And I think that there's a really good place and there's a need for nonfiction that is narrative and compelling. I mean, we have a lot of people who do it quite well. Deborah Heiligman, Laurie Halse Anderson, Tobin Anderson or M.T. Anderson, I guess as he's known in the book world. Steve Sheinkin, Candace Dempsey.

[00:19:25] There's a lot of people who do it well and I would love for my book to be a bestseller like Alex and Eliza. Is that what that one's called? I think that is. It looks like a great book and the truth is as good and as interesting as fiction. So if you're afraid of nonfiction, my friends, give it a chance. I actually, I read at least as much nonfiction now as I do fiction. I've totally fallen in love with it. And if you want to feel the world in a new and deeper way, give nonfiction a try.

Jennifer: [00:20:02] So you have another book coming out this month too. Can you give us a bit of info about Dear Santa?

Martha: [00:20:10] I do. And it's actually called Love, Santa.

Jennifer: [00:20:14] Oh, Love Santa, I'm sorry.

Martha: [00:20:15] Not to worry. It's, it's called Love, Santa. And again, this is one of these things where it's a story inspired by nonfiction. When my daughter was in third grade, she wrote me a letter and you know, asked, "Dear Mom, are you Santa? I need to know." And so I wrote her a response and because I was also, for a living, blogging at the time, I'm like, hey, here's a blog post. And so I posted her letter in my response and the thing went viral and a lot of people said, hey, you should make into a book. And I was like, "Oh, tut tut, sillies. Blog posts aren't books. You don't understand picture books." I didn't say that out loud, but I was thinking it. And then a couple of years after I realized, wait a minute, of course I could turn that into a story.



[00:21:01] And so I did. And so the book is a series of letters written between a child and her mom/Santa and it shows the girl growing up and starting to wonder, you know, who is Santa and is this real? And so this book is my response to my child, that is meant to make the magic of Santa into something that's deeper. I mean, it's basically about loving and caring for one another and it's about rising up and taking your responsibility in the world to make it a gentler and more giving place.

[00:21:39] And it's illustrated by Lee White. My editor on this one is Arthur A. Levine at Scholastic and Scholastic has absolutely gone to town making this a gorgeous book. So the Hamilton one has all of these images in this gold print and this beautiful design. This one has actual letters that pull out of tiny custom printed envelopes. And it took years to figure out how to pull it off and make it something that could be done for the price of a regular picture book. And I'm so excited about it. I mean it's personal to me, but is also something that millions and millions of people have already responded to a version of this. And this one is even better, as things are when you spend time working on them. So I'm really excited.

Jennifer: [00:22:28] That sounds amazing. I'm excited too. And it comes out September 26th, something like that?

Martha: [00:22:35] That is correct.

Jennifer: [00:22:37] So what are you working on now? Can you tell us?

Martha: [00:22:40] I recently sent off another picture book and I'm hoping that that one, um, gets acquired. It's looking good. I'm also working on a novel that I've been working on for a long time and I intended it to be a subversive fairy tale all along. In the world that we're living in today, it's harder and harder to be subversive because, well... You have to make a villain really bad in order just to feel realistic, now. That didn't used to be the case, I don't think.

[00:23:16] So, I'm working on that and I'm also, I'm in the midst of working on another big nonfiction biography that I can't talk about.

Jennifer: [00:23:25] Is it Aaron Burr?

Martha: [00:23:28] No, it's not Aaron Burr. Although I'd love to write that one for young adults. Also, if I can recommend, and I can't remember the author, but it's a book called The Heartbreak of Aaron Burr and it is really good. It's told in basically the letters between him and his daughter. And I just think it's quite an extraordinary account and you really get a feel for him. And I know that Lin Manuel Miranda also read that book to inform the

Burr character in Hamilton and that song, the one that, the Theodosia Song, it's so beautiful. And that book is there, that that song is in the musical, I think because of The Heartbreak of Aaron Burr.

Jennifer: [00:24:18] There's also a—

Martha: [00:24:18] Have you read that one yet?

Jennifer: [00:24:20] I have not. But there's also a novel that's on my to be read list called Dear Theodosia, that is also about Theodosia. And it's quite heartbreaking actually, because Theodosia dies tragically. And...

Martha: [00:24:34] Spoiler alert.

Jennifer: [00:24:35] — think that... Spoiler alert, sorry.

Martha: [00:24:36] No, she does. She does and it is utterly, utterly awful and heartbreaking. And you know she didn't ask to have a traitorous father and I'm sure she loved him because kids tend to love their fathers even if their fathers are grievously flawed. And, so yeah, it makes for a good story, doesn't it?

Jen: [00:24:59] It does. So now is the time when you can promote a non-Martha book that might be coming out that you might want to talk about. Maybe there's something you've loved recently.

Martha: [00:25:12] Oh, gosh. I'm trying to think of things that I've loved to recently that are coming out. I don't know if, if people have read, Tracey Baptiste's *The Jumbies*, she's got a sequel to it called *The Rise of the Jumbies*. And so creepy middle grade and is wonderful and awesome. And I think all I really need to say is black mermaids to get people to want to read that book.

Jennifer: [00:25:37] The cover is amazing.

Martha: [00:25:40] Oooh. It's a great cover.

Jennifer: [00:25:41] So gorgeous.

Martha: [00:25:43] I also just read *Freefall Summer* by Tracy Barrett. That one comes out next year and it's about... it's a YA novel about a skydiving girl which I hadn't read before and you know, it was so steeped in the details of that world. And then, *Dread Nation*. Have you seen the cover for that one?

Jennifer: [00:26:08] Oh my God, I'm dying to get a copy of that book.

Martha: [00:26:12] I know, I know. I mean, I've already preordered it because I'm going to own it, but you know, sometimes those of us in publishing can pull strings and so I'm working furiously behind the scenes to get my hands on an ARC.

Jennifer: [00:26:26] I do know how sometimes people can pull strings and yet somehow I still don't have one on my desk. It's annoying. But, uh, I'll work on that.

Martha: [00:26:36] Yes.

Jennifer: [00:26:37] So, now, as I do every week, I ask my guests what they are obsessed with this week. It does not have to be bookish. And I will start with mine because I'm super obsessed and it is bookish. So my obsession this week. The New York Review of Books is reissuing the Myra Coleman Max books or anyone who does not know when in the '80s or early '90s, the artists, Myra Coleman had a spate of terrific picture books come out from Viking. They are gorgeous and weird. I have the originals. My favorite ones were about Max the dog. And the first book in the series is Max Makes a Million. It originally came out in 1990 and it's coming out again in September and it is perfect.

[00:27:25] Like they've done every, the case is beautiful. Everything about it is beautiful. Max Makes a Million is about a little dog named Max who is a poet and a dreamer. His big dream is to go to Paris, but nobody will buy his book and he's flat broke. Well, one day he gets a call from his agent and I will read you that section. This is Max speaking.

[00:27:49] I'm back in my chair writing up a storm when, what should ring but the phone. Ha. It's Leon Kempinski my agent. Do you know what an agent does? He smokes a cigar. Takes your writing, tries to sell it, never does, and gets 15%. That's what an agent does. "Leon, what is it?" I ask. It's happened, Max. I did it. I sold your book for \$1 million. They love it, Max. You're going to dance on the roof of that city you're dying to go to. Lucky fellow, Max. You've got it made. I got off the phone, the black old phone. Someone was going to print my book. Someone was going to sell my book. Someone was going to buy my book. I couldn't talk. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe."

[00:28:34] Which I mean, I think that Max is much like a new writer.

Martha: [00:28:37] That is how it feels.

Jennifer: [00:28:40] Only maybe they don't sell their books for \$1 million, usually.

Martha: [00:28:43] For a million pennies.

Jennifer: [00:28:47] And he does get, I will spoil it and say he can fulfill some of his dreams, but there are future volumes. In the next one, he goes to Paris and falls in love. Then his book gets made into a movie and he gets a huge ego about it, and then he goes to India to find enlightenment. So, Max books. That's what I'm a obsessed with this week.

Martha: [00:29:06] He was, he was doing eat, pray, love before it was a thing.

Jennifer: [00:29:12] It is a crime that they went out of print, but it's a blessing that the New York Review of Books is bringing them back and it's coming in mid-September.

Martha: [00:29:20] That is just so cool. Okay. So what is my obsession? You know, I always have many going on, but one of the things that I like to do, so I get up really early, I get up 5:00 AM and you know, get some work done and then I go to the gym and then I come back and I do some more work and by the time 3:00 PM, 4:00 PM rolls around, I'm dead. Dead. I'm useless. So all I can do is prepare food. And I like to do that. And while I was doing the Hamilton book, I was, you know, just like slowly chopping and cooking food and listening to the musical. And it was a really happy time.

[00:29:54] So lately I've discovered that you can make pickles using a sou vide. It's a really easy thing to do. It's basically this device that you stick in a pot of water and it heats and circulates the water. And so you can, just, you put some vinegar or some sugar together and you can drop fruit in it. And this is something that I discovered at my neighborhood wine bar cause they do cheese plate and there's like pickles, but it's pickled fruit. So cherries and blueberries and apples and plums. They're amazing.

[00:30:30] And so, you know, I can be all Portlandia / Martha Stewart and they look, I pickled some fruit, let's have this and cheese and call it dinner. And you know what, it just, it's small and it's weird but it's so cheap to do and it makes me so happy. And so when I'm good for nothing else, I'm good for pickles.

Jennifer: [00:30:49] I love it. Well, Martha, thank you so much for joining me.

Martha: [00:30:52] Thank you so much for having me. This was really, really fun. And I do. Next time you sell a book, I want you to tell your client the amount in pennies just for that Max look... oh, there goes my dogs. My dogs, like Max, are agreeing.

Jennifer: [00:31:05] Thank you so much again, Martha, for joining us to talk about Alexander Hamilton, Revolutionary. It is out September 5th from Feiwel

& Friends, and there'll be links to it and all the other books we talked about in the show notes on the website. Additionally, the Literaticast is a Patreon. Throw in a dollar, and you just may win a copy of Martha's A Ham book, and you'll also have the chance to ask questions of our future guests, and more. It can be found at [patreon.com/literaticast](https://patreon.com/literaticast). If you liked the podcast, please feel free to leave stars or reviews on iTunes. If you hate the podcast, please have a wonderful day and do not leave reviews or stars on iTunes. Thanks so much again for listening and I'll see you next time.

[00:31:48] Literaticast theme music plays.