**Podcast: Literaticast**

**Episode: 47: Feeling Grateful (that 2020 is almost over), with guest agent Molly O’Neill**

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**Transcription by Keffy**

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

Jennifer: [00:00:06] Hello, and welcome to Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran and I'm a senior agent at the Andrea Brown Literary Agency, where I rep children's books from picture books through young adult. It is late November 2020 as I record this. It's actually Thanksgiving Day for those of the United States. And there's a fair amount to be thankful for, even in what has been a super rough year.

[00:00:27] Like there was an election, which saw more voters than ever before using their voices. It seems that very soon, we'll have a vaccine for COVID available, which feels momentous. We didn't get hit by a meteor. Awesome. And of course, there are wonderful books still selling, still releasing, and still enriching the lives of young readers.

[00:00:50] Still, I'm most thankful right now, honestly, that this year is drawing to a close. I know that logically, the change of the calendar year doesn't mean that things are magically all better. But it still seems like a bit of a fresh start, I think. Is that wishful thinking? Maybe, but whatever, I'm going with it.

[00:01:08] Anyway, today, I'm gonna have a nice chat with one of my first friends in the publishing world. Molly O'Neill became a baby editor at the same time that I became a baby agent. So in a way we've grown up together, and we've hung out together at conferences all over the country. And now she's an agent herself representing wonderful clients of her own at Root Literary. We're going to take it back to basics and talk about what agents are looking for, as well as digging into what 2020 has looked like for us, and so much more.

[00:01:36] Let me see if I can get Molly on the line.

[00:01:43] Hi, Molly.

Molly: [00:01:44] Hello, Jennifer.

Jennifer: [00:01:46] I'm so glad to have you. We were supposed to do this back in February or something.

Molly: [00:01:50] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:01:50] Life got in the way a little bit.

Molly: [00:01:52] Yeah, we thought we were gonna do it at midwinter. And then that didn't work. And now it's almost a year later.

Jennifer: [00:02:01] Whoops.

Molly: [00:02:01] It’s been a year that none of us expected. But here we are.

Jennifer: [00:02:05] True. But I'm glad to have you, finally. So why don't we start off by, as I have everyone do, please, can you give us a nutshell version of your publishing origin story?

Molly: [00:02:16] Yes. So in another version of my life, I almost became an elementary school teacher. But partway through college, I realized that the thing I was really fascinated with was kids’ books. And I have been in children's publishing in one way or another for the last two decades, full time for the last 18 years. I have worn many hats. I have been, when I first moved to New York, I worked in marketing. Kind of by accident, but it was the job that I got, so it was the job that I took and kept for a while. It was a job that was marketing, it was school and library marketing, it was a little bit of publicity, it was a very different era in publishing, so those things all overlapped a lot.

[00:03:04] Then I moved into an editorial role, which was the thing I thought I had always wanted to do, I thought I would do forever. I did that for a while then I left and worked for a startup that was publishing adjacent for a few years. And when that ended, I… startups don't always live forever. Unless they're a unicorn. This one ran out of steam. And so when it was time to figure out what do I do next, I became an agent. So I will have been agenting for five years in January.

Jennifer: [00:03:42] Congratulations.

Molly: [00:03:45] And I remember when I first started agenting, you were one of the very first people who said to me, welcome to the dark side.

Jennifer: [00:03:52] Well, I'm sure I didn't say quite like that, but… We’re not dark. We’re very nice. Um, okay, first things first, because I know that people are going to be dying to know this stuff.

Molly: [00:04:03] Yes.

Jennifer: [00:04:05] Tell me the names of some of your clients, what books they have that we would know, and what are your favorite things to rep.

Molly: [00:04:12] I rep a little bit of everything. I would never want to rep only one thing. I rep all—

Jennifer: [00:04:19] But for kids, right?

Molly: [00:04:21] All, kids, although, I have a few clients who may drag me into other spaces. And that's sort of one of the interesting things about agenting that's very different than the editorial side is, you know, you can kind of go wherever your clients go. Or if you meet a human who's doing particularly interesting things, if you can sell it, you can agent it is somewhat of the rule there.

[00:04:46] Luckily, too. I work with a team who, they have expertise in a lot of the spaces I don't, so I would feel confident if one of my clients writes, women's fiction or romance. I haven't repped those projects before, but I have colleagues who are very experienced in that space so I would rely on their knowledge and expertise.

[00:05:08] So I rep YA, I rep middle grade, I rep picture books. I rep a lot of graphic novels, all in the kids and young adult space. And some of my clients, a lot of them are names that people are just getting to know because they've all started their careers, or most of them have started their careers in the last five years.

[00:05:36] A few names people might recognize Adib Khorram who wrote the Darius the Great is Not Okay and its follow up that came out earlier this year, Darius the Great Deserves Better. Ellen Crenshaw, who's a wonderful graphic novelist who did the art for Kiss Number 8. Lynne Kelly, who wrote Song for a Whale, which is a wonderful middle grade novel. Emily Dove, who's illustrated a bunch of picture books. Chan Chau, who is a graphic novelist who's working on the latest Baby-Sitters Club arc. And then a lot of up and comers who are names that hopefully you will know in years to come.

Jennifer: [00:06:17] Awesome, you obviously have extremely good taste. Are there any kinds of books that you're particularly on the hunt for?

Molly: [00:06:26] I am looking for… this is always such a hard question, because I don't know what I'm looking for until I see it. I think I'm most interested in clients who have a unique voice and something to say whether they're saying that through the medium of a picture book, or a middle grade novel, or graphic novel, like all those are on the table, as long as you know, their skill set. And the things they have to say are exciting to me.

[00:07:00] But I am certainly always looking for illustrators. Many of my illustrators are also in the process of becoming picture book authors or graphic novelists themselves. So it's not uncommon for me to take on a client who the first couple of books, they illustrate someone else's text, and then eventually, we're moving into more of them working on books where the whole thing is theirs. I'm always looking for middle grade. You know, particularly the sort of heartwarming, feels like an instant classic sort of middle grade. I've never been someone who has small goals. So I'm ready to work on a book that wins a Newbery Medal.

Jennifer: [00:07:48] Nice.

Molly: [00:07:50] And, you know, while we're at it, let's do a Caldecott Medal to just keep the shelf shiny.

[00:08:01] And, yeah. Graphic novels have been one of the great surprises of my career, I didn't know when I started that I was going to do as much of them as I have. But it's been a really interesting evolution of taking what I understand about picture books and taking what I understand about novels and sort of following the breadcrumbs to understand what ways graphic novels are the same and different.

[00:08:25] And then, YA as well. I did a lot more YA when I was an editor, because it was the moment in time where the YA market was booming. I think all of us are doing a little less YA than maybe we once did. But I definitely have space on my list for some YA voices as well.

Jennifer: [00:08:47] Awesome. And I think you're open to queries, right?

Molly: [00:08:51] I'm open to queries. Yep. You can find more about my particular tastes and our submission guidelines. You can find them both on my website, which is MollyONeillBooks.com. Or you can find them on the Root Literary website, which is the agency I'm a part of. And they're essentially the same directions either place.

Jennifer: [00:09:11] And I will put links to both of those in the show notes. So interested parties can go to those websites to read more.

Molly: [00:09:20] Hooray! And I will say, I find a lot of clients through my inbox. So I know sometimes it can feel like throwing your work out into the ether. But some of some of the names on my list who people get most excited about were once a cold query in my inbox. So I think there are other ways that people find clients these days, too. There's Twitter contests and things like that, that sometimes feel a little flashier, but I am here to say that the old method works too.

Jennifer: [00:09:52] Yeah. 100%. I get a lot of people asking basically feeling like they can only do Twitter contests and things like, and quite honestly, the majority of my clients came from the query inbox.

Molly: [00:10:07] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:10:07] And not only that, but, I mean, a Twitter contest, I can only see for the 15 minutes that I have a break or something, I'm looking at Twitter. I know what missing hundreds of great things. And so I feel like if you think honestly that your work is right for me or right for Molly, the best way for us to see your work, and you know we saw it, is to reach out to us, in particular, and query. Rather than hoping that we randomly see a tweet.

Molly: [00:10:39] Yeah, I think you're right, there's a lot more chance that goes into the Twitter contests. I think, for me, personally, a lot of the clients I take on and a lot of the projects that pique my interest, it's because the writing is really strong, or the voice is really compelling. And that's also so hard to communicate in a tweet. I think tweets are really good for summing up projects that are high concept and that have a big sort of, “it's like this meets that” Hollywood feeling. But it's a lot harder to encapsulate the richness of a voice or an interesting framing device or some of the things that I really want to read your pages. That's why I ask you to send them to me.

Jennifer: [00:11:29] Absolutely.

Molly: [00:11:30] And all of my queries I read myself, much to the chagrin of our assistants who would like to wrest that away from me. At this point, I read everything that comes into me myself.

Jennifer: [00:11:43] So speaking of the “this meets that.” I know, in the past, I've discussed comp titles on this podcast a little bit. And that is, for listeners who may have forgotten or for the uninitiated, comp titles are comparative titles. It’s like when you say your book is Jaws meets Pride and Prejudice, or your book would be great for fans of Kate Messner, or something like that. That's comparison, right? So a lot of times people think that they absolutely have to have these in their queries. And they really spend a lot of time angsting about it.

[00:12:17] I'd love to know from you, Molly, do you think having comp titles is ultra important at the query stage? And if so, do you have advice about how authors can best find them?

Molly: [00:12:27] Yeah, so I think comp titles in your query, the most important thing they do, for me at least, is telling me that you have a sense of the contemporary publishing market. Because if you're comping to books that came out 50 years ago, or even, frankly, 15 years ago, it tells me that you haven't done a lot of reading of the current market. And children's publishing in particular, all of publishing, but I think children's and YA publishing in particular, is this living, breathing, organism that is evolving and changing and growing. And what we were rabidly publishing 15 years ago, looks really quite different than what we're publishing and how we're publishing now. And so I think that's the most important things that that comps do for me is they tell me that you spent time learning about the world you're trying to enter.

[00:13:22] I'm less concerned with, if you—I'm not grading you on your comps. I'm not saying like, oh, if you'd comped Emma, instead of Pride and Prejudice, that would have been way better. And chances are, I might borrow some of your comps when I make my pitch to editors. But I might know of others that are more suitable. And I think comps work in two different ways. And I'm curious how you how you approach this, Jennifer. For me, comps work either as, this story has the same sort of feeling. And a fan of X would like this. And then there's a more technical version of comps, which has a lot more to do with sales. And it's like, we think that the sales of the book that we're going on submission with might be similar to this book that your company has already published or that you're able to look up and see how it's sold.

[00:14:19] I think that second one that has to do with a lot more sales numbers, really is more the territory of an agent and an editor's job. I don't know that that needs to be an author's job. What do you think?

Jennifer: [00:14:34] I concur. I mean, I think for the author… basically, I'll figure that part out, sales and that kind of thing. I mean, I want the author ideally, to pick stuff where the tone is similar or the audience is similar. Like as you said, it gives me a sense of, of that they know the contemporary marketplace, but also just that they know who they're writing for and where it would be on the bookshelf in a bookstore. If you think that you're writing a YA but your book is really quite middle grade and tone and audience, I mean, there's something wrong. There's something… there's a disconnect, right? So it is helpful for me to know that you have a certain amount of expertise and have been thoughtful about what else is out there and where your book might fit in the ecosystem.

Molly: [00:15:29] Yeah. I think we think about them similarly. I don't think an author should be spending a huge amount of time on this part of the process, because it's something you can, frankly, obsess over forever. But if you're going to obsess over something, please obsess over your craft as a writer and let me obsess over the right comps.

Jennifer: [00:15:54] Yes, 100%. Okay, another thing that people obsess about in queries, since we're on the subject of obsessing over queries.

Molly: [00:16:06] We love you, authors.

Jennifer: [00:16:08] Yeah. We love you. But help us help you. Okay. Talk to me about author bios in queries. What do you want to see?

Molly: [00:16:18] Oh, interesting.

Jennifer: [00:16:19] What do you not care about?

Molly: [00:16:21] I mean, I never need to know, as nice as it maybe feels, that your kids or your grandkids, or the students that you teach, have all liked to this book. That doesn't necessarily mean a lot. Of course, they liked the book. They like you, presumably. If you have published books before, or have some sort of connection to this industry already, it's helpful to hear that. If you have an expertise that matches something about the story you're writing. A good example of this, my client, Lynne Kelly, who wrote Song for a Whale, which is about a deaf girl, has spent her career as a sign language interpreter. So that's a very important piece of information that helps me understand why she's the right person to be writing this book. So that's useful to have in there.

[00:17:21] And I don't mind knowing a few personal details, where you live, what you spend your time doing when you're not writing. I don't think it needs to be as cute and flirty, if that's the right description as like flap copy on a book, or even your bio on Twitter. I think it can be a little more business-y and informational.

[00:17:49] But for me, the real answer is, when I get a query, I skim the query very quickly, mostly to see, is this a person that I have met before at some sort of conference, or that I have communicated with online in some way, or someone whose previous book I gave some feedback on? And then I read the pages. And if the pages don't really compel me, in a way, it doesn't matter who you are, because I'm probably not the right agent. If your pages aren't clicking, and making me feel like I know exactly how to sell this book, or at least I think I want to keep reading to see if that that spark continues. If I do read your sample, and I want to read more than I will go back and be like, okay, who is this person now? Like now I'm curious.

[00:18:44] And I know that probably sounds terrible, given that you spent time slaving over that query letter. But that is the functionality there for me is that you're going to hear variations of this all the way through, it's all about the writing or about the art. If you're an illustrator, I care about craft first, and all the rest we can massage later together.

Jennifer: [00:19:06] Absolutely. Other thing [crosstalk]

Molly: [00:19:09] I will say something else about queries that's interesting. I sometimes give a talk at conferences where I show people the query letter that a client wrote to me, and this is all obviously with the clients permission, but the initial query letter they sent to me. The letter I then sent to editors when I put the project on submission, and the final flap copy. And very often there are turns of phrase that you see came from the author's initial pitch and sort of carried all the way through. So in a way, part of what you're doing with a query is you are the very first person that's telling people how to think about your book. And other people are going to also lend their expertise to that, we call it positioning, how we position your book in the market, how we situate it, how we indicate to people who it's for. But I think sometimes that that analysis is maybe a strong word for it. But seeing like, oh, my query letter serves a purpose other than just tormenting me. That actually, if you do your query letter right, there should be parts of it that are so strong that your agents like I don't even need to touch this, I'm just going to cut, paste into my own letter, which is then going to have some things that I know are the right things to say about it to a particular editor as well.

[00:20:39] And then very often, they're going to carry it forward in the flap copy or in the presentations they give to sales reps, who are going to use that same language when they're talking to booksellers who are going to use it talking to consumers or librarians who are going to use it talking to patrons. So in a way you're at the beginning of a very long chain of how books get talked about and sold all the way through the publishing process.

Jennifer: [00:21:01] Absolutely. I mean, I've had the exact experience, of course, where literally, basically, the query letter ends up becoming at least significant part of the flap copy. And I mean, I tell people, sometimes I get queries where people are like, oh, I don't really know much about querying. I don't know if I'm doing this right. I'm new. But please don't say any of that, because you are actually… That's so upsetting, because you are actually the expert. You're the foremost expert about your book. You know more about it than anybody. And whatever you tell me about it is what I'm going to believe. So…

Molly: [00:21:41] Yeah, that's my least favorite thing that query letters sometimes do is the when they apologize for the book's existence, or for the fact that an author has never published before. Guess what, every author was once an author who never published before. That's not something you apologize for. Frankly, that's something that most people will go through their entire life not having done and you've done it. So don't let your insecurity get the better of you when you're writing your query.

Jennifer: [00:22:10] Absolutely. So that's a mistake that people make when querying, what are the things that make you perk up when you get a query? Aside from of course, great writing, great story.

Molly: [00:22:21] Yeah, great writing, great story, obviously. Sometimes a writer will tell me a specific reason that they queried me, which I don't need to hear on a like making me feel good level. But they will tell me something about a book that I've either, in my case that I edited when I was on the editorial side, or that I have represented as an agent, and they find a connection point between that story and the book they have written. And that, to me, it's someone who's closely read my clients work, my work and so that intrigues me because it feels like one, they've done some homework to learn what kinds of books I've been involved with before, but also they're seeing some common ground between their work and mine.

[00:23:23] And frankly, the less well known the book that they are comping, the more intrigued I am, because if they're referring to a book that I edited, that was well loved by a small handful of people, but never became a global bestseller. It's more intriguing to me that someone has read and loved that and sees some commonality between it and their story, than if you're comping to really well known projects that I've been involved in.

Jennifer: [00:23:57] Absolutely. And I will say, too, I am, I mean, to add on that, I'll be frank and say that I'm incredibly vain. And also, I love my clients. So if you are talking about people that I've worked with, and books that I've worked on that you've loved, I tend to be a little bit in a better mood when I'm reading your query, that’s all.

Molly: [00:24:21] Science.

Jennifer: [00:24:24] Also, I should say, something else that makes me perk up. And this goes back to the bio part. I don't need to know your profession unless it is relevant. Like Lynne Kelly's being a sign language interpreter obviously relevant for a book about a deaf person. But also, I would really like to know if you're a librarian or a bookseller.

Molly: [00:24:43]Oh, yeah. Yeah, because that again, just, it shows that we're kind of speaking a similar language from the get-go, and that you probably understand some things about audience that even I don't, which can be really useful.

[00:25:02] Yeah, other things that make me perk up are people who are doing something kind of outside the box and confident about it. I think confidence, it's like the flip side of what we were saying before. Don't apologize for your work, but a confidence about something bold, or a style that hasn't been done a lot is very intriguing to me.

Jennifer: [00:25:32] Yeah, I mean, provided that it doesn't tip over into arrogance.

Molly: [00:25:36] That is very true. There’s a fine line there.

Jennifer: [00:25:38] I have gotten multiple queries that say something like, this book will be bigger than Harry Potter or the Bible.

Molly: [00:25:48] Yeah, that's not what I mean about confidence. I mean confidence in, again, the skill, the craft, the art.

Jennifer: [00:25:59] Absolutely. I knew what you meant. I just had to say it.

Molly: [00:26:02] Yeah, worth saying. I think also, this is this is sort of a subtle thing. But if it comes through in your writing that you care about your audience. That you are interested in being published, because of the young people that your books will be connecting with. I think that matters to me. That you know that this does not all stop and end with you.

Jennifer: [00:26:33] Totally. So you rep illustrators, as well. So what do you like to see when you click on an illustrator’s website or portfolio?

Molly: [00:26:41] Yeah, so I like to see as broad a spectrum as you can show me of the kind of work you do, while also it having some cohesiveness. So it's not all just like all your pieces thrown up in random order. But I like to see what does your black and white look like, or your gray scale art or your limited palette or two color, because that tells me about your capacity to do things like the interior art for novels, like the chapter headers, that publishers sometimes commission.

[00:27:19] I'm interested in seeing what your full color looks like. I'm interested in seeing if you do comics, or that sort of thing. It doesn't have to be the only thing you do, but I'm interested in seeing how you use that medium, and panels. I'm interested in seeing… actually, this is a really important thing. The age of Instagram has done a lot of good things for illustrators and social media in general, I think it has helped illustrators get their work out in the world in a lot of great ways. But it does mean that sometimes people are making art for that particular medium. And so the piece of art that you would put up as a tile on Instagram, basically is usually the equivalent of spot art. It’s not as often showing me what you would do with the expanse of a full page, or what you would do sequentially, meaning like, one series of movements to another or pages to another. It's not showing me how you’d use a page turn as a narrative device. So the more you can show how you would use the actual medium of books, as opposed to just a bunch of standalone pieces of spot art, the clearer sense I have that you understand the realm of books.

[00:28:51] And then I think the thing that really draws me into most of the illustrators that I work with is that their art has a narrative sensibility to it. That I look at their image and I want to know more about the story that is happening without any words at all, just based on the art alone.

Jennifer: [00:29:12] Absolutely. So people always, and I do mean always, ask me this question. They want to know about this myth that publishing grinds to a standstill at certain times of year, like summer and winter. So I've debunked this myth before, I think, but people keep asking. So I need someone to back me up on this. For me, personally, and I don't know about you. But for me, this summer was the busiest summer of my life. It was busier than most regular non-summer like August was busier than many non-pandemic regular months. So I truly think that this summer destroyed the summer myth once and for all. So now we have the winter myth. Does publishing really grind to a halt in December?

Molly: [00:29:59] I think the busiest month I've ever had as an agent was last December. So, no, it doesn't grind to a halt. I think people's focuses are in different places at different times. That's not necessarily yours to worry about as an author, or a querying writer or Illustrator. Down the line, it may be a strategy thing that you and your agent talk about. It's not always the wisest to go on submission at a time when a lot of editors are going to be out of office, because frankly, it just means the email gets buried. And it's harder to get people to circle back and pay attention to that. But that's a very different piece of the equation than when you're just querying in the first place. When you're querying in the first place, you're putting your token in line, if you will. And the right time to do that is when it's ready. Not some conspiracy theory around perfect timing. Because honestly, if we waited until the perfect moment to put things on submission, there'd be like three days out of the year, that editors are not distracted by anything else.

[00:31:17] And then 2020 exploded and blew up a lot of our understandings of the normal cycle of publishing, which I think has just reinforced to me that we get the work done as we can when we can, and you can't… As much as I'm a strategy person, and I love a good strategy, and I love it when editors play into the hands of my strategy, it doesn't always work. But that's not always bad. Things can still happen, even when they're not happening perfectly. I think we try to control it, because it's all so unknown. And that can only go so far.

Jennifer: [00:31:59] Yeah, I mean, for me.

Molly: [00:32:01] I’m preaching to myself here.

Jennifer: [00:32:03] In terms of querying agents, just get in line, babe. If you wait until January, you'll be that much further behind in the line, I read things in the order received. So when I'm open to queries, which I'm not at this exact moment, but when I do, it's like, I think that most agents probably do read things as they come in. So if I don't have time to read something right now, I'll read it when I get to it. But you'll just be that much further back in the line if you wait. So you might as well put it in.

Molly: [00:32:30] Yeah, and I don't think there's a lot… I think sometimes people think oh, there's a certain time of year when agents are in a better mood, and that gives my book a better chance. And I don't think that's really true…

Jennifer: [00:32:45] Because we're always in a bad mood, or?

Molly: [00:32:49] Well, I was thinking about that, you just said if someone praises your author and their query, it puts you in a better mood. But the reality is, the kind of manuscript that makes us sit up and notice is going to do that at any time. And the kind of manuscript that we are not feeling we’d be the right agent for that can also happen at any time and is fairly disconnected from mood.

Jennifer: [00:33:17] Yeah, I have offered rep to people on Christmas Eve. And I have gotten offers from editors on Christmas Eve. So I feel strongly that it doesn't matter. I mean, yes, most people are out of the office the week between Christmas and New Year's and a few days surrounding that. Most people probably out of the office this week, or at least the end of this week, because it's Thanksgiving week. But for the most part. I mean, that's just every business is closed during between Christmas and New Year, it's not that big a deal.

Molly: [00:33:48] And I also think like this year, again, there's so much that 2020 is teaching us or reminding us, or surfacing. And one of them is publishing is an incredibly human business. And so people are getting their work done, I think, now more than ever, when they can. And for some people, that means early morning and other people that means crazy late at night, and some people that's on a weekend and other people it's on a holiday and I think everyone's trying to do their best work when they know works for them. And right now people working so much from home enables that in a slightly different way.

Jennifer: [00:34:25] Particularly people who have kids at home and who have to work around that. I mean, it's just, basically the point is query when you're ready to.

Molly: [00:34:35] Query when you're ready.

Jennifer: [00:34:37] For what it's worth, from my perspective, editors seem super overwhelmed this year. I've talked to lots who say they're getting more submissions than ever. So I suspect basically for the rest of 2020 I'm probably going to hold off on new submissions unless there's something absolutely urgent. That isn't to say there won't be sales, there will be sales, but they're going to be things that are already under consideration. It's gonna be people trying to clean off the desk not adding more to it. What do you think?

Molly: [00:35:03] Yeah, and I think one thing that's very unique this year is that because of the pandemic, and because so many editors are located in New York, even though some of them had temporarily located elsewhere, they lived through the pandemic in a very intense way and have spent the last eight months or whatever point we're at, nine months being very cautious. All of which has wound up to mean that very few people have taken their vacation time this year. And they don't get to roll it over. So it's like use it or lose it in this last wave. I've talked to a lot of people who are taking extended Thanksgivings, who are leaving for the year early. Basically, I think a lot of people just in pandemic times are traveling to wherever they're spending Thanksgiving with whatever family or whatnot, and then just staying there indefinitely. They're not going back and forth the way they might otherwise, all of which makes them have a little less bandwidth for reading.

[00:36:12] So I agree with you, I'm not putting anything new on submission. I have a few things that are currently in play. I may… I’m very likely to announce some deals before the end of the year. So it's going to look like I made deals the second week of December, but in fact, they are deals I made three months ago, and now the contract is executed. And finally, we can announce them. That sort of situation.

Jennifer: [00:36:34] Yeah, totally. So from your perspective, what else has changed with the pandemic. What has changed for you and your job?

Molly: [00:36:44] Everything takes more time. Everything, everything, everything. And I think some of that is we are all a lot more fragmented in whatever ways are unique to us. I feel very strongly no one is having an easy time in this pandemic, we're all just having different hard times. So for some that's managing kids at home and school at home and trying to juggle work. For other people, it's worrying about sick friends and family or themselves being sick. You know, all of which has meant that people have a lot on their minds other than just work, and it's harder to sit down and focus. The whole industry had to effectively learn on the fly, like repairing the plane while flying it how to work from home. That was the bulk of the spring was a big learning curve of editors. And I think a lot about younger editors who've had less time to know what it looks like to do their jobs in the first place. Or who are still being actively mentored by their bosses having to reshape how that dynamic works, I think is something that has taken a lot of time for people.

[00:38:10] So I think editors are reading more slowly. Some of it is frankly, people have a terrible setup at home, a lot of them. They're crammed into a corner of their bedroom, or at work they had, I think about this with legal. One of the one of the things that is very frustrating is that contracts, I don't know, if you're finding this, Jennifer. We're finding that contracts are taking much, much longer. And it is frustrating, but at the same time, I've been in the offices of the legal team, and they're used to having all sorts of paper files at their fingertips to reference. And many of them have two or three monitors that they're reading back and forth between and I doubt that many have been able to replicate that at home, which means it slowed their process down. So yeah, just everything is going more slowly on a, we're all learning how to do this at the same time, way.

[00:39:14] But also, I think, everything requires thinking it through newly. Because so many of the things that we just took for granted of well this is how this thing works. That isn't how it works anymore. I was talking to someone yesterday who was telling me about a nursery school teacher friend, who was saying that one of the things that's been sort of startling is that kids aren't learning how to share right now, the way you are used to thinking about in preschool, right. And the way many, many picture books talk about. But the idea of like, you play with this for a little while, and then I'll play with it for a little while actually. is not what we want to be teaching kids right now.

[00:40:04] So even something that basic requires sort of like a stepping back and recalibrating. I run up against this a lot with illustrators, the question of like, do we put masks on some of the characters in this group scene of this book that's going to be coming out in 2023? Or 2024? Like, what choices are we making? It feels like everything requires an extra layer of questioning and trying to forecast the future. Even the things that we used to know off the cuff really easily what the right answer was, it's less easy.

Jennifer: [00:40:44] Yeah. How has business been for you?

Molly: [00:40:47] I have been furiously busy. I've sold a lot. Some of that is probably because I have a lot of clients on my list who are in the earlier stages of their careers. And so we were working on things that were close to ready to go on submission. I've had a lot of projects come in for illustrator clients. And I have encouraged people, to, like, we don't know what the future holds, let's sell what we can while there's still money in the bank.

Jennifer: [00:41:26] Yeah, this has weirdly been my best year, which is very strange to say, because it's also been the worst year.

Molly: [00:41:32] It’s very strange here.

Jennifer: [00:41:35] But yeah, I've been very busy. And I'm very thankful for that. At the same time, I don't think I could have predicted anything, like, what has sold and what is happening is all very different from what I might have assumed if I thought about it last year.

Molly: [00:41:55] Right, and it's not that we got any less good at our jobs, it's that there's so many more unknowns and the things that we're used to relying on. The role that booksellers play has changed, because people aren't walking into bookstores in the same way. And the role that librarians used to play has changed now that there's not multiple in person library conventions every year. And frankly, a lot of libraries are spending their budget keeping their staff employed, rather than buying new books. And all of that ripples down to impact daily choices. And then they are sort of other fun wildcards like there's been a paper shortage all year, and that's had impact. And that was going to be part of 2020, even before the pandemic. And there have been a lot of mergers and rumored upcoming mergers of publishers.

[00:42:53] I think there's been a lot of… If you’re someone who wonders what does my agent spend all their time, every day doing? A lot of it is constantly taking the temperature of our colleagues on the editorial side and understanding how are things going right now? And how are their acquisitions meetings going and who is too burned out temporarily, because someone in their family has COVID. And that's where all their mental energy is going to be a good person to submit to right now. And all of those factors play into it. So it does just feel like everything takes more time.

Jennifer: [00:43:34] Totally. Are there any positives you think might come about because of the pandemic like things that have changed that might never change back in a good way.

Molly: [00:43:43] Yeah, I hope we're gonna have time to do some of that thinking. I feel like that's big picture, creative thinking, and a lot of the past months have been focused on like, survival mode.

[00:43:58] But I do hope that somewhere, particularly at the executive levels of publishing, they're having some of those conversations. And then I think, as whatever the new version of the world starts to emerge looks like, we will probably also be finding some of those answers. I think for some editors, they've understood differently. It's forced a lot of editors who religiously edited on paper to finally learn how to edit digitally.

[00:44:38] Or, it's really funny. I had a client who we went on submission with a project last November and there was a bunch of interest. And so we were setting up phone calls, as you do with a bunch of the interested publishers and she was someone who had come out of tech and she asked if we could do video chats. And for a number of the editors, they sort of came into the Zoom screen or whatever being like, oh, this is so new and exciting. I've never done this before. And I sort of laugh, thinking how ahead of the curve they felt three months later, when, you know, now all we do all day is have Zooms with people.

[00:45:19] I also think it's changed the reasons people are buying things. In a way sometimes. I had a project that I had put on submission in the earlier stages of this. I don't remember exactly when it went on submission, that sold only recently. And when I pitched it, I had focused on the themes of revenge and the sort of like dark, edgy layers of it. And the editor who bought it was coming at it very much with the understanding that this was a story about survivor's guilt, and that there was going to be a hunger for that sort of story in years to come. And I was like, oh, that's interesting. I don't know if we would have gotten there had the world not been what it's been these last months. So I do think, even though we can't totally tell what is coming on the other side, people are trying to think thoughtfully about what kinds of books will be important for readers to have as they're making their way through.

Jennifer: [00:46:23] Absolutely. There's a couple of books. I mean, several of my books this has happened with, where when I sold them two years ago, or however long ago, they were one kind of book. And now they seem like a very different kind of book. For example, the Deborah Underwood and Cindy Derby book Outside In, just gotten a lot of attention is literally about being inside and thinking about nature outside. And I mean, I just don't think that we could have possibly thought that it would be timely.

[00:46:58] Kate Messner has a new picture book coming out called Sloth Wasn't Sleepy. Basically, when I sold it a couple years ago, it was a very cute little picture book about mindfulness and going to sleep, cute. And now it's kind of like about overcoming trauma and centering yourself and self-care and it's just got a different vibe. It's the same words, it’s the same art, but the vibe is different.

Molly: [00:47:30] Yeah, and the opportunities look different. I have a picture book by my client, Sam Wedelich that's a retelling of Chicken Little. It’s called Chicken Little the Real and Totally True Tale. And it's all about fake news, and what to do if you accidentally spread fake news and your responsibility to your community when they misunderstand reality. And like you said, it's all the same words it was, but it lands differently in 2020, than it did previously.

[00:48:03] I have a book, The Starkeeper by Faith Pray, which is about hope and sort of passing hopefulness between people that has felt like such a book for this moment. It’s always been a beautiful book, but it, I think, resonates differently. And I think that's some of the magic of the picture book, in particular, or really any kind of book, but especially a picture book is that you can read it in different moments, and it says different things to you. And it means different things to you in your own journey.

Jennifer: [00:48:39] So I have a couple questions from the Tumblr if you want to help me answer them.

Molly: [00:48:43] All right.

Jennifer: [00:48:44] What is your advice to avoid getting discouraged during the querying process? I've had a lot of rejections on my work in progress. And I'm glad for it, because that made me take a deeper look and make a lot of positive changes. But now I'm on my 11th draft, I'm still a little worried something about it may not be good enough or unique enough. The same time I know the only way to guarantee failure is to never try. So what is your advice to keep from getting discouraged?

Molly: [00:49:10] I give a lot of… I'm going to go on a tangent here, but I promise it's going to relate. Because I've worn a lot of different hats in publishing, I end up doing a lot of interviews with prospective young people who want to work in publishing or people who've been out of publishing and want to get back in or want to reinvent. And I feel like the advice that I give them and the advice I would get this person are very similar, which is it's all about the story you tell. So much of, frankly, our whole world, is about storytelling. And people in publishing, including agents and editors are very susceptible to good storytelling.

[00:49:55] So it may be that your manuscript itself or your portfolio itself need more polishing. But it could also be that you're not telling the story of your story in quite the right way. Or you're telling it in the most obvious way but there's a different thing to highlight that might capture… Kind of like we were just saying that some of these books, it's like, well, there's the obvious thing that it's about, but there's this whole other… It’s like if we were describing it in wine terms, right, it would be like, well, there's so and so on the nose.

[00:50:32] It's a thriller on the nose. But the bouquet, it’s really… I don’t know. Clearly, I don't talk about wine exactly right.

[00:50:39] But I think sometimes looking for a different way to tell about what your story is could be something you try. So if your pitch is very straightforward, and not giving a lot of detail about the story, or about the writing itself, perhaps that's something you want to focus on. If you spent your whole query talking about what it was like to write this book and haven't thought as much about the audience is, kind of try spinning the query 30 to 60 degrees and come at it again. See if that gets you anywhere, because I think that's some of what we do. You know, if we put something on submission, and it hasn't quite sold, sometimes it's a matter of, we'll try some different editors, but sometimes it's like, let's emphasize something different. And if we thought people were gonna bite because it was a feminist retelling, but in fact, what people get excited about is the setting, great. We don't know if that's going to work unless you try it.

Jennifer: [00:51:48] Right. I also think, well, we talk a lot about revising. But sometimes authors don't know when they should actually stop revising, let go, and start querying. And then also, sometimes I think people, there's such a thing as overworking a book.

Molly: [00:52:06] Yes.

Jennifer: [00:52:06] If you've revised it 11 times, maybe it's time to set it aside for a little while and work on something different. And then you'll have fresh eyes for that book when you come back to it later or you'll have something new.

Molly: [00:52:18] The book doesn't self destruct just because you set it to the side. And it might be that that was never meant to be the first book you publish, it might have been the first book you wrote. Excuse me. It might have been the first book you wrote, but it might not be the first book that it makes sense to publish.

[00:52:41] We have this conversation sometimes with clients of like, let's set this to the side. And once we have found you publishing home and an editor who really understands your work, maybe they're going to look at that same project with a different set of eyes and know how to solve the things that we couldn't figure out together. Or sometimes a book doesn't work in its original incarnation, but you can kind of plummet it for, that's not the right word. But you can use it for parts, basically. I sometimes call them book zombies where you take the villain out of one book and pop them into a different book. And as an agent, I'm always sort of delighted by that because I'll be reading along on somebody's new manuscript, it’ll be like, hey, I know you, and now you're the hero. And there's a certain sort of victory and like, okay, I didn't set this character up in the right story originally, but I've found where they belonged.

Jennifer: [00:53:51] Yeah. So here's another Tumblr question—

Molly: [00:53:56] Pillage! That was the word I was looking for. Pillage for parts.

Jennifer: [00:54:00] Oh. There you go.

Molly: [00:54:00] Not plummet.

Jennifer: [00:54:03] I thought you were saying plumb, like plumb the depths of. I don't know.

Molly: [00:54:06] There you go.

Jennifer: [00:54:08] Okay. So new question. What is the deal with celebrity books? Are they really good for the publishing industry in general, and why are they often so lousy? Ooh, hot tea.

Molly: [00:54:19] Hot tea. Well, I've never worked on… that's not true. I've worked on some as an editor. You know, I think they're largely being written by people who like the idea of having written a children's book, more than the act of writing it. I think they're also very often a collaboration between a whole team. Sometimes there's a ghostwriter involved, sometimes there's a manager involved. Sometimes the well-intentioned celebrity is hoping to use it to prop up something else that they're doing and so it's not always as pure as a book that a writerly sort of writer might create.

[00:55:03] Why do they exist? Because they sell copies of books, which keeps your editor employed and their bosses employed and the lights on at the offices that are not currently inhabited.

Jennifer: [00:55:22] And they allow… If they make money, they allow the publisher to then take a chance on books by unknown debuts, and things that might be a little riskier, because they have money to do so.

Molly: [00:55:37] Yeah, and my favorite piece of it is they sometimes mean a lucrative job for an illustrator. So I am a fan of that. But I think it's, you know, if you are a writer who gets frustrated by the existence of them, it is better to think of them as like a book shaped product than then truly book. The same way a Kraft slice of cheese is a cheese product, very different than a fine cheese. Use that sort of analogy in your head, like, it's not really in competition with you and what you're trying to do. It exists in kind of a different realm altogether. And most of the people who are going to spend their money on a celebrity book, they might walk into a bookstore, or go online and shop for that book. And they might not have otherwise done that. And they might, while they're there, pick up another book, too, and it might be one of yours.

[00:56:43] So there's a lot of ways it can be beneficial, even though it feels like they are taking up some of the air in the room.

Jennifer: [00:56:50] Yeah, I mean, I would say, too, there's a lot of people, I know that a lot of listeners will not believe this because you guys are all book nerds. If you've gotten an hour into this podcast, you are a nerd for books. And let me tell you, you're rare. Most Americans do not buy any books. They do not read any books. So big numbers for a book is not big numbers for something like a TV show or our movie or something like that. So this piece of pop culture that is book industry is very small world actually. So probably the people buying celebrity books don't buy any other children's books in a year, they just happen to see something by their favorite actress. And they were like, whoa, I love her. I'm gonna buy this thing. I don't know what a children's book is supposed to be. But I like it because my fav wrote it. You know what I mean? They're not like thinking about it in literary terms, per se. They're people that are not normally buying books. And so, as Molly said maybe it'll make them buy more. But I really wouldn't worry about them contaminating your audience or sating your audience because it's a very different audience, I think.

Molly: [00:58:16] And any book can grow a reader. So there are readers who might not have ever come to your book or any books had they not read that book. So they can be a gateway drug of sorts, in a good way.

Jennifer: [00:58:34] I mean, some of my favorite books as a kid, were eight by eights, like Berenstain bears and tie-in fairytales and stuff like that, that were literally mass produced written by just some peon in the publishing company, I'm sure. And I loved them. And I got them all the time because they were very cheap and at the supermarket. And I—

Molly: [00:59:01] And that’s your experience of book, right? At that age, like that’s what a book was to you.

Jennifer: [00:59:06] I like books. Yay, I like Berenstain bears. I mean, now in retrospect, I do not like Berenstain Bears. But five-year-old me thought they were adorable and nice. So, whatever. I'm not saying the Berenstain Bears are the same as celebrity books, but they're the same in the sense that they are mass market kind of item that is not literary. And they still grew a big reader so you know.

Molly: [00:59:35] Indeed.

Jennifer: [00:59:35] Okay, now we're going to move away from all the query talk and publishing talk and talk about you and your books and your brain. I'm going to pick it because it's self-promotion corner. A lot of people out there are looking for the perfect Hanukkah or Christmas book for their kiddos or New Year's present or Hey We Survived 2020 present. You want to give some of your favorite picks in multiple categories as recommendations.

Molly: [01:00:07] Well, all of my books are my favorites so I'm not gonna say these are my favorites, but I--

Jennifer: [01:00:11] So let’s say, favorite brand new books that people can look for. And that will narrow it down.

Molly: [01:00:18] Yes. And I'm primarily going to focus on books that came out this year that you might not have heard of, because our ways of hearing about books have gotten a little shortchanged this year. So a couple of them I already mentioned earlier Chicken Little, the Real and Totally True Tale by Sam Wedelich. That's out from Scholastic. And coming in March is the companion book, Chicken Little and the Big Bad Wolf, which is one of those rare but wonderful second books where the second book might be even funnier than the first book. And so if you get the first one now you'll be ready for the second one, when it comes out in March.

Jennifer: [01:00:54] Yes, I think we all need some humor.

Molly: [01:00:57] It is super funny. So many good chicken puns. And Sam's art is very funny as well.

[01:01:05] The Starkeeper by Faith Pray is not at all explicitly a holiday book but it has to me the feeling of a holiday movie where by the end of it, your heart feels very full and warm and you want to go out and embrace your whole community. Although you're not going to do that, because COVID. It has that sort of like we are part of something bigger than all of us and we're all just trying to do our part sort of message and hopefulness. And the art is stupendous. I could stare at it for hours, and have.

[01:01:41] You mentioned a book by Deborah Underwood earlier. She is neither of our clients. But I have an illustrator who got the good fortune of working on one of her books, because she is someone who writes a lot of great texts. And this was Joy Hwang Ruiz's first book as an illustrator. She is a client who got known on the internet and on Instagram, in particular, as MomIsDrawing. And she's now moved into bookmaking. And the book is called Every Little Letter and it is about all of the letters of the alphabet who live in their secluded little worlds never crossing paths with letters of other kinds. And then one day, the littlest letters find a hole in the wall, and they start frolicking, and teach the big letters some important things about coming together.

[01:02:37] A lot of my books actually have a theme of coming together or the power of community. And I think that's something that matters to me. And I think is part of how we make the next generation of humans into good people. So Every Little Letter is really fun and colorful and charming and stands up to a lot of rereads.

[01:03:03] And then I'm gonna mention one more that is not quite a picture book, not quite a middle grade, it kind of falls into a nonfiction-y space between them. And this actually came out last year, but it's such a good book as a holiday sort of gift that I'm gonna mention it anyway, it's called The Dictionary of Difficult Words. My client Jane Solomon worked for dictionary.com. She is a lexicographer, there are only a handful of people in the world who that's their job. But her job is to understand words and their meanings. And so this is a book of 400 big interesting words. And it's the kind of book that if you are a nerdy kid, this is just so delightful to you because you spend hours poring over it. It's got these great illustrations as well and you pore over the illustrations, you pore over the definitions and then you, at the dinner table, proudly use one of these words and wow the whole family and feel just exceptionally cool. It also makes a great coffee table book for non-children as well. It's kind of good for all ages.

Jennifer: [01:04:13] I need that.

Molly: [01:04:13] I'm going to shout out two more that are middle grades. One is part of a series, the series is called Escape This Book. They are written by an author, Bill Doyle who I do not represent. They’re illustrated by my client Sarah Sax. And they are… so the first book is Escape This Book! Titanic, the second one is Escape This Book! The Tombs of Egypt. The third one that just came out last month is Escape This Book! Race to the Moon. And they are kind of a hybrid or a mashup of like a choose your own adventure and an I survived book. And there's lots of interactive parts where you as the reader are drawing things, are tearing pages, are turning pages, are solving puzzles. If you're a parent who needs something for your kid to spend several hours disappeared in their room while you take an important conference call in these times, this is exactly the series you want. And there's such interesting history and science sort of facts wrapped in as well.

[01:05:21] And then I want to shout out to a great middle grade fantasy series, the second book… So the first book in the series is The Tragical Tale of Birdie Bloom and the second one is The Triumphant Tale of Pippa North. And The Triumphant Tale of Pippa North came out in March, right as the world kind of melted down because of COVID. And I feel like it did not get all of the eyeballs on it that that it should have.

[01:05:47] These are like classic middle grade fantasy. The first one is set in an orphanage. The second one is set in a boarding school. There's a fire horse, there's dragons, there's magic, a lot of the true meaning of friendship, the true meaning of family. Each book is narrated by the book itself. They're part epistolary. They've just got so many great elements, they're funny, they're heartwarming, they are the kind of books that eight-year-old me, ten-year-old me, would have read and re-read as comfort reads over and over. So if you have a reader that enjoys some light hearted fantasy, I highly encourage. Those are by Temre Beltz.

Jennifer: [01:06:31]That sounds like Jennifer catnip.

Molly: [01:06:34] You would enjoy them.

Jennifer: [01:06:36] I would like to read those over my break, that’ll be lovely.

Molly: [01:06:40] I will send you copies once I have unpacked the boxes that contain them because I just moved and I don't know where anything is.

Jennifer: [01:06:47] Congratulations. Any other ones who want to sneak in?

Molly: [01:06:52] I mean, I can keep talking. People love Adib Khorram’s book, if you haven't gotten on the Darius the Great train yet. Darius the Great Deserves Better came out this summer. That's the companion to Darius the Great is Not Okay. And those are beloved by readers of all ages. They're about identity. They're about understanding who you are, finding your place in the world, finding friendship. Adib has his first picture book coming out in March. So this is a bit of a pre-shout. But I think it's an important one. Adib is Iranian-American. And that is always a part of his stories. And in March comes Seven Special Somethings: A Nowruz Story which is about the Persian holiday of Nowruz. And as far as we can tell, it is maybe the first book about Nowruz ever to come out from a major publisher, coming out from Penguin. So we're very excited for that. And all of the young readers who have never seen that holiday which is important to them and their families celebrated in a story. And the art, it's not my illustrator, but it is fabulous. There's a very, very naughty cat that appears on almost every page that I enjoy very much. And it's really exciting when a client like Adib, who, you know, queried me with a YA and has become well known for a YA is also reaching into other spaces and understanding what his books and stories can do for a different kind of reader. I find that really exciting.

Jennifer: [01:08:21] Yes, I love that. And if you want my picks they are on the last episode, the previous episode to this which is the October episode. I gave all my pics with my bookseller friend Suzanna so you can go check that episode out if you haven’t.

Molly: [01:08:35] I'm gonna have to go listen to that.

Jennifer: [01:08:37] Yes. And I will link to all the books that Molly mentioned in the show notes with links to buy them from a friendly independent bookseller. And they would all make great gifts or pre orders. So now, Molly, it's the time that everybody's been waiting for.

Molly: [01:08:57] Uh oh.

Jennifer: [01:08:56] No, not for us to shut up. Rather—

Molly: [01:09:01] I mean, I still have more things to say.

Jennifer: [01:09:03] Rather, it is time for what are you obsessed with this week? it does not have to be bookish, but it can be. I will go first so you can have time to cogitate and mine are definitely not bookish. I have two, actually. They're both TV shows, surprise, surprise. For a book person, I feel like I talked about TV constantly.

[01:09:26] So let's say it's Thanksgiving break or about to be Christmas or Hanukkah or celebratory ending of the year break. And you have some time to just chill out and watch something and you want something funny and heartwarming and just nice. Like a Parks and Rec kind of vibe. I highly recommend Ted Lasso.

Molly: [01:09:53] Everyone is talking about this, I have not yet watched it. So you're tipping it to the top of my list.

Jennifer: [01:09:59] I am going to tell you. Oh my God. I can't remember even if I talked about this last time, I very well might have, but I'm still thinking about how much I liked it. It's definitely worth another mention. It is on Apple plus, which I do not have and nobody I know has. However, they do a free week trial, which is all you need, because there's only 10 episodes and they are short. So I would strongly recommend doing that. It is about an American football coach who goes to London to coach a premier league football team, which is of course soccer, which he of course knows zero about. Now, I am not a sportif kind of person, you may be surprised to learn.

Molly: [01:10:37] Right there with you.

Jennifer: [01:10:39] I do not know anything about sports or football or the other kind of football or any sport, actually. But it doesn't matter. I was completely won over by the sheer wholesomeness of this entire endeavor. One of my friend said, Ted Lasso made him a nicer person.

Molly: [01:10:58] Wow.

Jennifer: [01:10:58] And somebody else I know said. They called it like a hug, where you burst into tears because you didn't know you needed it.

Molly: [01:11:07] Oh.

Jennifer: [01:11:07] And I can't help but agree. It's just such a wonderful show. Please watch it and be happy. And my second obsession is The Crown. I just finished bingeing the fourth season, I'm completely obsessed. I cannot stop reading articles about it and googling historical things and thinking about Lady Diana's clothes and whatever. I know that it's fictionalized and a lot of these things did not happen the same way that they happen in the show. And also, I don't care. I'm into it.

[01:11:39] And also, on some interview, Olivia Coleman, who plays the Queen, of course, said that her dialect coach, because I don't I'm sure you know this, but there's a lot of different kinds of English accents. and receive pronunciation is how we're normally hearing like, say, a BBC broadcaster or whatever talk like Standard English accent. But the Queen doesn't have that accent. The Queen and the other very, very posh people in the royal family have a different sort of accent. And her dialect coach said that the way that English people say the word, E-A-R-S, ears is how the Queen says yes. Like this: [Sounds like a combo of Ears and Yes in a British accent.] And now I can't stop thinking about that. Right, I've been answering “ears” all the time.

Molly: [01:12:39] I'm going to adopt that.

Jennifer: [01:12:40] I know.

Molly: [01:12:40] It will be the Royal We and the Royal “Ears”.

Jennifer: [01:12:40] I love it. Okay, so Molly, what are you obsessed with?

Molly: [01:12:51] What am I obsessed with?

[01:12:54] So this is borrowing my obsession of like, a week and a half ago because what is time, but I am also obsessed with a TV thing. It is The Queen's Gambit on Netflix. I very much enjoyed it. I gulped it down all in one weekend. It was the weekend that I had just moved into my new apartment and should have been unpacking and instead melted into the couch and watched this lovely drama. It is smart. It is nerdy in a way that I enjoy in that it's someone who cares passionately about one thing.

[01:13:33] But everything about the cinematography is beautiful. The costumes are stunning. The atmosphere, you just get very swept up in it. And I think because the main character is so obsessed with chess, because she is obsessive, and we are following her, we get obsessive about the show itself and following her story. So I don't think it's something where you can casually watch one episode and then come back to it later. I think it like consumes you in a really interesting way.

Jennifer: [01:14:08] Yeah, I have a lot to say about The Queen's Gambit. So just for a minute, indulge me. Also, the main character is so unbelievably beautiful.

Molly: [01:14:17] Oh my goodness.

Jennifer: [01:14:18] Since she’s playing chess, there's a lot of just close ups of her face playing chess and it's like, how do you exist? But also, here's something that I loved about that show. I love that it subverted so many tropes. Like there are a few things that you know about television shows. Like if they show a big scary orphanage, it's going to be terrible in there. Like there's going to be people getting tortured or something. Guess what? There was a big scary orphanage and it was okay. It wasn’t that bad.

Molly: [01:14:53] I had a friend after I'd like raved about it on all my different forms of social media. A friend of mine who's a social worker texted me, and she's like, I'm halfway through the first episode. And I'm nervous, like, is there going to be abuse inside this orphanage? Because if so, I'm gonna bounce. And I was like, no, it would make you think it. And I was like… because she’s like, they’re giving, I’m not giving anything away that doesn't happen in the first episode. But like, they're medicating the kids. And she was worried that that was leading somewhere really disturbing. And I was like, no, it's just there to you know, I was like, there is substance abuse all the way through it. So if that is a trigger for you, okay, but yeah, it makes you think it's going in one direction and then it like switches up on you but in a way that—

Jennifer: [01:15:36] Yeah like, for example, there's a moment and again, not a spoiler. A creepy dude looks at her in a way. And there's a lot of moments actually where there's creepy dudes that could potentially in another story and less deft hands, there would be like a molestation or a weird, bad thing that could happen. Ladies, you know what I'm talking about? I felt myself bracing for that a lot. Because in most books, and in most stories, in most shows, when you see these telltale signs, you're oh, here we go. It's the rape scene or whatever.

Molly: [01:16:12] Especially a story that is so much about power.

Jennifer: [01:16:15] Yes. But guess what? None of those things happened. Because bad things did happen to her. But they were because she made choices that were bad. And she purposely did them. It's like, she made mistakes. She made choices. But things were not done to her. Which is something of a modern miracle, because it's so unlike other shows, quite frankly, with women main characters.

Molly: [01:16:40] Yeah. Agreed. I also really loved it because teenage Molly was absolutely obsessed with the soundtrack to the musical Chess. It’s written by ABBA. Yeah, this is this is a deep cut. But anyways, there's at least three of you listening to this podcast, who are nodding emphatically right now. And you will also enjoy the fact that it stirs up all of those songs in your head while you are listening.

Jennifer: [01:17:11] Yeah, I must say that, although for a brief moment in time, while I was watching, I thought, maybe I should take up chess again. I then remembered that last time I played chess, I got beat by… well, I beat a five-year-old. But then I got soundly whooped by his six-year-old brother.

Molly: [01:17:33] You know, that's one of the other things that is so great about this is like, a lot of times when you watch a movie, or even read a book about something that's a particular niche interests, you have to really understand it to understand what the thing that's happening is and why it matters. And the funny thing with this is like, you come away believing that you understand how to play a very sophisticated game of chess, even if you've only ever done it three times, or not at all.

[01:18:01] Like, you believe by the end that you, too, could give a smoldering gaze over a chessboard and somehow defeat a world champion.

Jennifer: [01:18:11] Well, the other thing is, I mean, it's basically a sports movie, In much the same way that Ted Lasso is a sports show. Which means actually, just like in most sports movies, you don't need to know anything about the sport. It will carry you along. What it is, is the high stakes, sort of MacGuffin, or something. It is the thing that is making the story happen.

Molly: [01:18:32] Yeah, you just exploded my brain. I didn't make that connection. You're right. It's 100% a sports movie. And that's part of the mechanism it's using. But it doesn't look like a sports movie. It looks like a period drama.

Jennifer: [01:18:47] Mm-hmm. Anyway, what a great conversation.

Molly: [01:18:49] It’s apparently based on a book, too, so.

Jennifer: [01:18:51] It is, and I've heard that the book is even better than the show and amazing and short. It is a novella, I think. So that might be another nice holiday read. Short is the thing that we like in this moment where we all have divided attentions.

Jennifer: [01:19:05] Indeed. Well, Molly, it was fantastic to talk to you. Oh! Wait…

Molly: [01:19:09] I’m going to circle. Can I circle back on… Actually that reminded me of one of your questions that you gave me in advance that we did not really touch on. But I was thinking about it after you sent it. And you asked something to the effect of like, what other moments in publishing time does the pandemic feel like?

[01:19:28] And I was thinking a lot about that, because I was in publishing in 2008 when the recession happened, and in fact, worked for an imprint that was abruptly shuttered and closed at that moment in time. And both my excellent boss at that time and I went on to continue having careers just different ones than we had expected.

[01:19:51]And it also feels a little bit like publishing post-9/11, which was the moment that I arrived in New York. I moved here at the beginning of 2002. And so New York was still very much in sort of, recovery, what just happened, mode, emotionally as well as on a technical level.

[01:20:13] And so I think, if I can just like to give a word of reassurance that there is a lot happening in publishing, and there's… the pandemic is absolutely impacting it all. It has to. Publishing is an industry in a capitalist society in the world. It’s not immune to any of that as much as it is also something that we are all very personally connected to. And you know, sometimes think only about the idealistic sort of emotional parts of. So it is being impacted by the pandemic, and that is changing things. And, you know, it may look different by the time we're on the other side of it.

[01:21:02] But kind of throwing back to one of your earlier questions, I think that is also where the growth comes from and new opportunities come from. So out of the ashes of one version of publishing, the next one emerges. So I think it can be startling, though, if you're someone who came into publishing in, say, the last 12 years, which, you know, it's between once things sort of found footing again, after the recession, things have been pretty chill for a while. And so if you entered at that point, the things that are happening now, you know, hearing that there have been layoffs, or that you know, different companies are up for sale, it can feel really alarming. But publishing has survived wars, it is survived many moments in history, and it will also survive this one.

Jennifer: [01:21:58] Absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Molly. It's been a pleasure chatting.

Molly: [01:22:05] Indeed. Always. I wish we were doing it in person stuck in an airport after a conference like we normally do.

Jennifer: [01:22:12] I know. Well, there will be better days ahead. I guarantee it. Airport stuckness and all.

Molly: [01:22:20] And all. I oddly look forward to that.

Jennifer: [01:22:26] It’s weird to think that I sort of miss Newark Airport but whatever.

Molly: [01:22:30] Yeah. We were have a fabulous dinner and Bologna in March. Remember when that was our plans for 2020?

Jennifer: [01:22:37] Can we? I can't even. Are you? What do you think about Bologna in… Let's not even. Okay, no. We can’t talk about that. I will bid you adieu and see you on the internet.

Molly: [01:22:49] Indeed. Take care, Jennifer.

Jennifer: [01:22:53] Thanks so much to my wonderful guest, Molly O'Neill. And thank all of you so much for listening. If you'd like to support the podcast, we have a Patreon. It's at patreon.com/literaticat. Throw in a buck and keep the podcast coming. If you'd like to browse any of the books that Molly mentioned, they are up in the show notes on my website. That's JenniferLaughran.com/Literaticast.

[01:23:16] By the time you hear this Thanksgiving Day will be over. But if you're in the US, I hope you had a wonderful long holiday weekend. And to everyone, stay safe and warm and wear your mask. I'll see you next time.

[01:23:32] LIteraticast theme music plays.