

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 48: There Are Dinosaurs in the Library! with Author A.G. Allen

(Brief intro music)

Mary: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Mary.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel.

Mary: We have a very special episode today, because we're here to talk with author A.G. Allen about her new picture book, "There Are Dinosaurs in the Library!" This is "a richly illustrated picture book for children ages four to ten. "It's library day, and Mrs. Barker would love to take her class for a visit, but it will take some creative thinking and imagination to persuade a distracted student named Alyssa to get with the program. When Mrs. Barker reminds the class that there will be dinosaurs in the library, everyone, including Alyssa, is eager to go. Boy, are they surprised—and a little frightened—when the library transforms into a Jurassic playground." With wonderful illustrations by Octavio Cordova, Rachel and I both loved this story. It was just published on September 30th, so be sure to check out a copy to support the creative team. A.G. Allen is both a storyteller and a teacher, as well as a traveler. She has been to fourteen countries so far and is calling us today from her home in Mallorca, Spain. Thank you so much for coming on the show with us, A.G.!

A.G.: It's my pleasure.

Rachel: Well, I'm going to get us started with question. So, I was perusing your website—which is fantastic, by the way, I love the design!

A.G: Thank you.

Rachel: Um, I read in your author bio that this book is closely based on a dream that you had about having a group of students in a library where the dinosaurs jumped out of the pages. That must have been wild, and clearly the inspiration stuck with you. So, could you tell us a little bit more about that?

A.G.: Sure. Um, it was about six years ago, and I had this dream, and I was a child in the dream. So, I was one of the characters, but I was a child and I watched these dinosaurs jump out as the teacher opened the book. And I just remember in the dream being so delighted and thinking this was so much fun. So, when I woke up, I just wrote the story down, but then I just put it on the shelf. I didn't really think much about it, but it...it was so vivid in my imagination that I had to write it down. About, uh...in December, I graduated with a Master's in Creative Writing, and I had started the novel as you do for your last project. But then I realized I didn't really want to do that novel. So, I thought, well, I want to do some sort of creative project. So, I turned back to this story and then it just took off from there.

Mary: What a neat idea. Um, and throughout the book we see so many different types of dinosaurs! Some we know and love, and some that were new to me, at least. When writing the story, how did you pick which dinosaurs to include? And because everyone has one, which is your favorite dinosaur?

A.G.: My favorite is probably Velociraptor. So that's my favorite dinosaur. Yeah, I...I...from Jurassic Park. I like the fact that they were smart, they worked in the team, they communicated. So, I liked that about them. But I picked the two most popular ones, um, the T-Rex and the Velociraptor. The other ones, really, I looked them up on the internet. So, I just started searching for dinosaurs. I looked at pictures of them. I thought, what would be kind of cute and fun for the kids? And that's how I picked the dinosaurs.

Rachel: Very cool. I think my favorite is probably the pterodactyl.

Mary: (pauses and then clicks tongue) Yeah.

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: I think I'll piggyback off of you and say the Velociraptor, because you're right. They're so smart and they're just so cool.

Rachel: (laughs) My favorite part about this story is actually the character Alyssa. Which is really funny when you take into account the fact that the first thing out of her mouth is literally "I hate the library." (laughs) Kids, right? But we see her go through a bit of a journey, and I

thought that you write these characters so believably. Is Alyssa based on one or some of the students you've taught in the past, or is she purely from of your imagination?

A.G.: I think she's purely from my imagination. I teach high school students, I teach middle school students, but mostly high school in the last eight or so years, and I just knew that I wanted someone that was a little feisty and a little belligerent.

Rachel: (chuckles)

A.G.: And so that came to be. Uh...I didn't really based her on anyone, and my forte in writing and creative writing is characters. So, I always come up with the character before I come up with the storyline, with the conflict, everything. The character just kind of springs to life fully grown in my head. So, I can see them, I can hear them. So, when I sit down to write, I have their voice in my head.

Mary: Speaking of characters, the librarian's iconic line takes place once the chaos has reached its peak. Before then, we don't really see her in the midst of the action. Is she not able to see the dinosaurs like the class can? Or is this just a regular day for her? I know I would be just as overcome as the children if I saw dinosaurs in the library!

A.G. and Rachel: (laugh)

A.G.: A regular day for her. That character was based on...even though I didn't give her a lot to do because I wanted to focus on the kids and Mrs. Barker, but that character is based on a real librarian that I worked with in China—um, Mrs. Fistonich. And she and I used to chat all the time, and that's exactly how she would have responded. She would have carried on with life. She's New Zealand, so she would have had that accent—

Rachel: (laughs)

A.G.: —and she would have yelled, "Just remain calm, children." So, yeah.

Rachel: That is perfect.

Mary: That's cool.

Rachel and Mary: (laugh)

Rachel: So, I have to know...what was it like collaborating with an illustrator as talented as Octavio Cordova? I did stalk their Art Station and their Instagram accounts—just, wow. Their style is so gorgeous and vivid.

A.G. Isn't it? Um, I chose him specifically because of his style. So, I went to a platform—my daughter works on a platform, so that's how I knew about it—called Upwork. And so, Upwork has creative people on there. When I started the project, I was looking for an illustrator that had these...this vivid, rich style and just kind of 'jump off the page' style. I knew some children's books are really pastel-y, and I wanted these jewel tones. So, I wanted something deep and rich, and when I saw his portfolio I thought he was perfect. We did a meeting, and it was so...it was like he got in my head. So, all I did for him is I gave him the script and I told him what I thought the illustrations should look like. But all of these images and everything you see, those were from his imagination. And I think what was the best part that I didn't realize I was getting was how expressively he illustrates. So, you see the expression on the children's faces, on the dinosaurs faces, um...and I just really loved it. So, it was really a dream working with him. He lives in Ecuador, and we did everything, uh, either Zoom or mostly just through the platform where he would send me preliminary sketches to see if I liked them. If I did, he would move forward to the full-on illustrations. And so he did the whole book. I initially hired him for the inside of the book. I loved it, and then I hired him for the cover of the book, front and back. And he did also those...uh, I don't know what you call them, but those first pages before you get to the actual text.

Mary: Wow.

Rachel: It's an incredible talent.

Mary: Yeah. Um, so, speaking of design—text placement and font are such an important part of a picture book, right? So, we can get a character's tone, volume, and personality just from the style of text. We can have text that's straight across, swirly, little, big, you name it. It creates little stage directions for grownups when reading it aloud, and makes for a more fun experience for the young readers. How do you decide where the words go on the page?

A.G.: I first started out just really plain. I did all the text layout myself, and I didn't like it. So, it was really plain. Um, but there was a book that I used read my daughter when she was a little girl called "The Stinky Cheese Man."

Rachel: Oh, it's very popular. (laughs)

A.G.: I liked it. Fonts are crazy, and they were big and they were little, and they were this and they were that. And so, uh I told Octavio, uh...I had done it first myself, and then I said, okay, I want to add something to your list, um, can you do this inside text? He said sure! I said...I gave him a copy of "The Stinky Cheese Man," I said I want this feel, and then he just took it from there. I had feedback...uh, once he did it, I loved it. I loved what he did and I loved everything that he did. But I had feedback like, "No, this is not good for a children's book. It's going to confuse the children." And I said, "You know what? I'm going to take my chances with this," because I just remember my daughter growing up and we had lots of books, and my favorites were those kinds that had that little kind of...little something extra, not just plain type on the page.

Mary: Right. It just makes it so much more fun, I think.

A.G.: I think so.

Rachel: Okay, so, "There Are Dinosaurs in the Library!" was literally just published.

A.G.: Mhm.

Rachel: But you tease on your website that it is the first in a series about adventures in reading. Can you give us any hints as to what's coming next?

A.G.: I...I...I didn't dream it, but I was just sitting around daydreaming, and I came up with the next one. No, I know what it was! I was on a plane. So, I've been flying back and forth to, uh, South Korea, to Spain, trying to get everything sorted. And I was on a plane and I came up with the second one. I had a list that I...of...of different ideas, because in the library could be, you know, 'astronauts in the library'. There was a lot in there. And so, on a plane I came up with, "I think they're going to be cowboys in the library." So, I've written that story, but I want to give

this some traction, give this some time to be out there for a little while before I come out with that one.

Rachel: Oh yeah. Definitely. Yeah.

A.G.: I wanted things that are fun and that I think kids will be interested in. And so, I think for me, cowboys in the library is something I thought...I...I know kids have a lot of other things. I'm kind of dating myself. However, I think that those kinds of stories where they can pretend will be appealing and that will have action in them. So, that's why I chose that.

Rachel: I agree one hundred percent. (chuckles)

Mary: Yeah, me too. Uh, so, this book is joining so many other wonderful stories in kid's picture books. So, apart from your new book, what is a picture book title that you recommend everyone read and why?

A.G.: Let me think here. I just read a whole bunch of 'em this summer!

Rachel: (laughs)

A.G.: One about the Billy Goats Gruff—a new version of it that I thought was fantastic. And what else did I read this summer...? You have to forgive me, I have a terrible memory.

Rachel: We do, too. That's fine.

A.G.: But there's so many good ones! Oh, there was one about...it was a lady and a dog. And so...and a man and a dog. And they each had dogs that didn't match them. And people would say, "Why does the big lady have the little dog? And what does the skinny man have the big dog?" And then they met and decided to trade dogs, but the dogs...they didn't work out. That was really cool, too. So, forgive me for not knowing the titles.

Mary: That's okay. We can look them up and we can always link them.

Rachel: Yes, we're librarians. That's what we do.

Mary: Right.

Rachel and Mary: (laugh)

A.G.: It's on, uh...I have an Instagram. I covered them on my Instagram page.

Rachel: Oh sure. Yeah, I can look through that. That's everything we have time for today, listeners. We hope that you enjoyed this episode. Please check the show notes for a list of everything we just talked about, as well as links to A.G's website and socials. We ask that you subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. As always, you can reach us through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by sending messages to @OakCreekLibrary. Thank you so much for coming on the show with us, A.G. Until next time, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye! (laugh)

(Brief outro music)