

LAURA: Hi, this is Laura Backes, and today, I'm speaking with Melissa Thomson, author of the *Keena Ford and the Second Grade Mix Up* and her newest book, *Keena Ford and the Field Trip Mix Up*, which is published this month by Dial Books for Young Readers. These are chapter books for ages six to nine.

And I think these books are really delightful. They're written as first person journals kept by Keena Ford who is a second grader. And what I especially like is that Keena is a real kid. She's not perfect, but she's spirited and curious. And she tries to do the right thing.

And the situations in the stories reflect the little every day events in a real second grader's life. So Melissa, thank you so much for being here with us today.

MELISSA: Well, thank you for having me.

LAURA: It's really fun to talk to you. And I was wondering did you develop these books as a series from the start? And if you did, what aspects of Keena's character make her able to carry a series or exist over more than one book.

MELISSA: Oh, good question. Well, first of all, thank you again for taking the time to talk to me. I'm very excited about this. And also, thank you for your very nice words about the book. I really appreciate that.

So, as far as Keena as a series, when I was writing the first Keena, I think because I was teaching second grade at the time and all of my students were really into this idea of chapter books, and reading a chapter books series was kind of this rite of passage and it was a sign that they were becoming big kids and not little kids that read picture books all the time and that they could follow characters, so I think at the back of my mind, I had this idea that it would work as a series, but I didn't have anything specific planned out *beyond* what I was writing for the first book.

And then, the more I got to know Keena, the character, the more I could picture her in different situations. And one thing that was helpful with that was my own experience as a teacher and how I have -- every year, I have students that are calm and they're self-directed and they do their home works, they stand in line quietly, they follow directions the first time I give them some tasks and those are the kinds of students that make my job a lot easier and Keena is definitely not one of those students.

She is another kind of student who, for example, may show up on the first day of school, excited to show off a brand new outfit. And then, within fifteen minutes, the outfit is covered with paint because a student was nervously chewing a pen or something and the ink explodes all over it.

And that's the kind of student that Keena is. She doesn't necessarily make my job easier as a teacher, but it makes it a lot more fun and a lot more interesting and gives me a lot of stories to tell. So, I think that the fact that in any sort of situation, something could just go wrong for someone like Keena is what gives me a lot to say about her, I suppose.

And the other, I guess, piece of making Keena work as a chapter book series is that she has so many relationships with friends and family that are really important for her. And so, it's really interesting for me to explore those dynamics. And I think there's a lot to explore with her relationships with her parents, with her brother, with her friends at school. And the fact that she's a people-pleaser, but all of these people have different expectations for her, that gives me a lot to work with.

LAURA: I think you hit on an important point there on character development in that you say that the kids who are not necessarily always the good, well-behaved kids are the ones who give you the great stories. And I think in books, those are the characters that give us the most interesting protagonist because things can go wrong. And also, it makes them much more human and much more accessible, I think, to the readers. If you're reading about a character who is perfect and who does everything right, you start feeling really inadequate as a reader.

MELISSA: Mm-hmmm.

LAURA: You can't possibly measure up to that. But also, it's not very interesting. We want to read about...

MELISSA: Right.

LAURA: ...stuff that goes wrong and then, see how the character fixes it or how they get out of that situation. That's what makes for a good story-telling, I think.

So, I also really like the way in the print interview in the *Children's Book Insider Newsletter*, you defined conflict for this age group as *problem*, and then *solution*. And also, something that keeps Keena from getting what she wants, so that might create the problem for her. She wants something and she can't get it. So, it sounds to me, as a writer, it's very necessary to develop your character *before* you develop your plot so that you know what the characters wants and then, can prevent her from getting those things.

And I was wondering, as an author, is it important to have a lot of strong character traits up your sleeve that you can pull out as needed when you need plot twist? In other words, are the characters -- do you sometimes develop them more than you think you might need for one particular book, so that you have these things in reserve if you need them.

MELISSA: Yeah, I think it's important for me at least to be acting wherever I put those character traits are that can create a believable problem for a character such as Keena. And I personally -- that's something I think about before I'm writing and while I'm writing and then, after I completed a draft. And for example, before I started writing the second Keena book, I went back and re-read the first one for about a million times, just to make sure her voice is clear in my head. And also to consciously review what the character traits are and brainstorm different situations Keena could be in and think through how she could react because of what I know about her personality.

And it's funny because I never really thought about her having a complex personality. But I think maybe what makes her complex is that she has this defining character traits that are somewhat incompatible in that she's eager to please and she really wants to make the decisions. This is so important to her. But she's also really impulsive. And she acts without thinking. So, I think there's a lot of room for conflict in imagining what happens to a child who has these two almost opposite personality traits and how she tries so hard to reconcile and it does nothing, but really creates problems for her, I think.

LAURA: And I think too when you've got two character traits pulling in opposite directions like that, you have a lot of opportunity for humor in the story, as well. And I think when authors are developing characters, it's often helpful to say, "Okay, my character's going to be this way. So, what's the exact opposite of that and can I throw that in as well?" and it does create for some funny situations because the reader see that pull and they think, "Okay, what's Keena going to do now?"

MELISSA: And one thing that I've been lucky in my job to get to see is actual, real life children that are like this. It's not like I sat down and thought, "Okay, here's a character trait. And let me pick an opposite one to create conflict it with." I would see -- I would work with these children and try to think, "How does this keep happening? You know this child means so well. And how does this keep happening?" And then, trying to find it, taking the real child and mentally trying to figure out what was going on. And that's where -- I realized that this is what was going on with some of these students. It was that there was this set of incompatible character traits that they have. So, I think that's been helpful for me at least.

LAURA: I find sometimes that writers have a bit of a hard time understanding the early chapter book genre. They get easy readers because it's a very specific kind of writing with the shorter sentences and the simpler construction and the simpler vocabulary. And then, of course, we have middle-grade novels which are very easy to find because they're full-blown novels, but the chapter books are kind of in-between. And I wondered if you had any tips for writing these books as far as the time span you cover, the link to the story, the complexity of the problems or the plot to you? Have any advice for the construction of these books?

MELISSA: Well, when I wrote the first Keena book, I didn't consciously think through the time period or how this was all going to work until I was really into the story. And then, I started trying to map out, especially because it's a journal so I have to say what day it is and what time she was writing certain things down and think about it that way. I started to really make those decisions about the time period once I was already writing it.

And then, for that first book, it spanned about a week in Keena's life, first week of school, and maybe I think a few days before at the end of summer. And then, for the second and third book, I just followed that pattern that I've established in the first book, which was about a week, and then with *two* major conflicts.

In the first book, the conflicts are her birthday mix-up and her misadventure hiding under another teacher's desk. And then, on the second book, she gives herself a rather

unfortunate haircut on the eve of a major field trip. And then, she has this debacle with the line order in her class or she wants to be in the back of the line. And it keeps not looking out for her. So, this turns into a major problem. So, those were the two major problems in each of those books.

And then, in terms of the description, I think I just to describe being -- what Keena would notice. I don't think in terms of, "I'm going to have x-amount of description here. And this amount here." It's not like a mathematical kind of things. It's just things that I think she would notice I try to include.

And one example is when I toured the capital for *Keena Ford and the Field Trip Mix Up*, I've done a tour with my class, but that wasn't really a situation where I could take notes and slow down and think about how everything was going to work. So, I went back by myself and had a very nice tour guide who led me around. And he was telling me all of these very interesting things about, "Oh, this underground passageway was built in 18...", whatever and, "...it was used for this or that." And then, what I'd be writing in my notebook was, "There are a lot of pipes down here" or, "This person has really shiny shoes", those kinds of things that I -- knowing Keena, that those are the things she would be interested in.

LAURA: Well, and I think, it's interesting you say that each book has two major problems, but those problems are major in a second grader's mind.

MELISSA: Right.

LAURA: To an adult, these are not -- where you stand in line is really no big deal. But to a second grader, of course, it's *huge*. It's everything! So, I think that getting into that mindset for whatever age you're writing for is so important and not writing down to them. So, you do a really good job of not condescending, not saying, "Well, Keena wanted to be first in line, but it's kind of silly that she wanted that." You totally get it!

And I wonder if you think that authors just get a certain age group or do you think you can really develop that as a writer?

MELISSA: I think that was something that I really didn't know when I first started teaching. And being around six and seven, eight year olds a lot, these were things that were news to me. When we had the first -- my first class was having all kinds of lining-order issues. It was like, "Really? This is really that big of a deal to you that this person...?" I mean, I can picture these two little girls on one of my classes that will be sitting on the rug, reading a story or something. And they'd see the clock. And they know it's about time to line-up. So, they start scooting to a certain corner of the rug because they had determined that I would call the students from that place last to line up.

So, it was like this whole -- it was a *huge* deal. And so, that was something that I definitely learned as a teacher. And I would assume that as a writer, if you were around children that age or spent a lot of time talking to people that were, those are the kinds of things that you could certainly develop if it wasn't something that you -- it wasn't

something that I just automatically knew that these sorts of things would be issues for them.

LAURA: Well, and I think we all have those memories, too. And things really don't change that much over the generations.

MELISSA: Right.

LAURA: When I was that age, it was who got to collect the home work papers or who got to collect the milk money that day for the teacher.

MELISSA: Mm-hmmm.

LAURA: It was a big deal. And it was a really important job. And if somebody got to collect the milk money twice in one month, everybody knew that they got an extra turn.

MELISSA: Right!

LAURA: That wasn't fair, you know? So, these things really don't change. And I think a lot of authors, it takes a while to figure that out. They think, "Oh, modern kids! I can't relate." Well yeah, you can because inside, they're really not that different from the way we were at that age.

MELISSA: I've seen a number of authors who have said, "Well, I think this is kind of my stage of arrested development. I write for fifteen year olds because I think it hard on the fifteen year old" or, "I write for ten year olds, because I react as any ten year old would." And I think that's something that -- my husband had, semi-joking, what he said to me is that because I tend to respond to things as maybe a seven year old would. I think about these things, this *fairness*. "It's not fair that this person got to do this and I didn't." And so, just the way I respond, I've learned as an adult not to -- you're not honest about these sorts of things. You don't tell people, "I wanted to take that cookie and you took that cookie. And it's not fair." But you know not to let everything out. And that's something that someone like Keena who's seven hasn't learned yet. So, if you get down to your gut reactions to situations sometimes that can be more child-like and useful, rather than -- and maybe you don't need as much interaction with actual kids because it's in all of us somewhere, I'm sure.

LAURA: You have a really amazing agent, Laura Rennert. And how important is it in your opinion for an author to have an agent these days?

MELISSA: I think, personally, for me, it's extremely important. It's been extremely important for me. And I know that without Laura Rennert, I wouldn't be published because she has helped me so much at every step of the process. She gave me really helpful feedbacks for revisions before we sent out the manuscript. She found a great publisher for Keena.

And another reason why it's been really important for me to work with her is because in terms of the publishing industry, I'm a completed outsider. I spend most of my day talking to small children and having things out of construction paper and unscrambling

spelling words and trying to color on the lines and doing all these first, second-grade tasks all day long. And so, I don't know who to talk to about this or what should be in a contract, anything like that. So Laura, she knows books and she knows the industry really well. And I know she's making smart decisions on my behalf. And then, I ask a lot of really dumb questions and she doesn't seem to mind because I really don't know a lot about the nuts and bolts of the publishing industry, I guess.

But that being said, I think it's important for me as an author to know those things. I mean, I don't think it's good for me to just say, "I don't know anything." And say, "You just do everything and..." because every author knows, I guess, that you can't just rely on your agent to do everything for you. I have to play huge well in creating the book obviously and then, trying to figure out how to market it and doing school visits and all of these kinds of things. So, I have a responsibility there. But I'm just not somebody that's good at that. I'm not a business-savvy kind of person. So, it's really helpful to have her to ask questions to and to get a lot of information from.

So, I don't know if maybe was someone was better at this kind of things than I am. It wouldn't be just as crucial. For me, it wouldn't be possible without her.

LAURA: Right! Well, and it sounds like you have a really good rapport with her. Do you think that's important as the writer? She gives you feedback and that sort of thing, is it important to get to know the agent and make sure that you're going to have that kind of rapport before you actually sign on with them?

MELISSA: I would guess. With Laura, right away, I really liked her. And I knew that we would work well together. And so, it was -- from our first conversation, because she had read the manuscript and she was excited about it. And I think what was important was that she saw Keena the way I saw her. And she picked up on the things that I was trying to do with the manuscript. And she thought it was working. And she gave me some good suggestions on how to make certain things stronger. So, I felt like she saw the book the way I wanted it to be seen. And so, I think that is probably what was most important for me.

LAURA: So, is there a third Keena book in the works?

MELISSA: The third Keena book is in the works, yes. It's due quite soon.

LAURA: Do you have a title for it yet?

MELISSA: The working title is *Keena Ford and the Friendship Mix Up*. She has various conflicts with her different friend groups and with the kind of, I guess, what would be the second-grade version of Frannie's people that she -- with school, you can't -- it's kind of like everyone -- you have co-workers that get along with better than others. And same at school, there are kids that she just would rather not have to deal with, but that's something that she can't avoid. So, that's going to be part of the third book.

LAURA: Well, and I remember when my son was in second grade, that is the first time you have that friendship friction stuff going on. It seems to come up in the second grade. And

then, again in about fifth grade. And then, in seventh grade. So, it's a cycle. But it begins in second grade. I remember.

MELISSA: And it's really amazing, especially with girls. Not to engender stereotypes, that was a horrible thing to say. But I've noticed overall with girls, they are more likely to remember things that happened that were bothersome to them. I am more likely to have a little girl in my class come up to me and say, "So and so said this to me two weeks ago. And now, she's saying this", and so on -- it's not just isolated problems that are dealt with and forgotten. It's like this ongoing bill that was -- of conflict and it was thousand other thing that was surprising to me when I started teaching this age "Wow! You're really concerned about what was said to you in the playground in March and now, it's May. And you remember that this was exactly the way this all transpired, so..."

LAURA: Absolutely! That is so true. And girls do. They remember. They internalize. And they act out verbally...

MELISSA: Right.

LAURA: ...whereas boys will punch each other. And then, it's over. So yeah, but girls it festers for a long time. And it does. And it starts real early. And I remember when my son was that age, I was shocked at how -- I didn't remember from my own second grade it being like that. It probably was, but that was something I had just forgotten. And I was surprised to see how young it started.

So, I think you're good to address it in a book. And we'll see how Keena deals with it.

MELISSA: Yes, not smoothly, I can guarantee that much.

LAURA: Well, good! We wouldn't want it to be smooth. That would be any fun at all. Do you think you might ever write for different age group?

MELISSA: I really like to. I'm really interested in trying to write for young adults and then, maybe a middle-grade book. I've got some ideas, but nothing that's nearing completion at all. But I've been reading a lot of young adult books. And I'm interested in maybe that being another project. I mean, I would love to continue with Keena as long as possible. But I think it'd be fun to sort of stretch and try other things as well. So, I'm interested in doing that. But I don't have anything to show for it just yet.

LAURA: Well, you're doing great so far, I think. So, I'm -- everybody, I really think if you're interested in writing this chapter book age group or if you have a child in second or third grade, definitely check out the Keena Ford books by Melissa Thomson.

And Melissa, thank you so much for being here with us today. And we're going to look forward to seeing what you come up with next. And maybe, when you write your young adult book, you can come back and talk to us about that.

MELISSA: Oh, I would love to. This was so much fun. Thank you so much.