

THEO BAKER: Welcome back to the SCBWI podcast. I'm your host Theo Baker. And on today's episode I had the great privilege to talk with Illustrator, cartoonist, and bookmaker Cece Bell. If you don't know her work, Cece is a wildly creative and prolific creator of beloved in absurd and heartfelt picture books and graphic novels, including her semi-autobiographical Newbery Honor winner, *El Deafo*. Cece's books are like weird little sculptures that grow in the corner of a room or a desk drawers out of random materials and somehow turn into something true and unexpected, and strange and hysterical. I talked in person with Cece at the winter conference in New York, where she faced her fears and rode an elevator up over 40 stories just to talk with me, knowing full well she'd have to ride the elevator back down once the interview was over. We talked about idea making, working with absurdity and humor, and how to work patiently and experimentally while keeping things moving forward. If you're already a fan of CeCe's, you'll be thrilled with this talk. And if you're not a fan already, you will be by the end of the hour. I hope you enjoy.

Thank you so much for coming and talking with us today. We're huge fans of your work. All of us are a SCBWI. Thank you for coming.

CECE BELL: And thank you for having me.

TB: So this is something I ask most people, and you can answer any you want, which is, if you could, just your own words, tell us a little bit about where you come from, and how you've come to now?

CB: I come from Virginia. I was born in Virginia, raised in Virginia, and was only away from Virginia for three years for graduate school in Ohio. But in terms of books and everything I was the kind of kid who could read, but didn't really enjoy reading, especially not fiction. I liked some fiction, but I was much more interested in "how to" books. You know, like, I had this wonderful book from the 70s. And I am a child of the 70s, 80s. But I had a book that came out in the 70s called, *Kids America*. And it was a "how to" book about how you could do things like the pioneers did, like make donuts. Make your own stuff, make cottage cheese, make a life-size mannequin of yourself. And one of my best friends who is actually the best friend in the book, *El Deafo*, Martha, she lived across the street from me, we would pour over this book and try to do all the things in it. So from a book standpoint, it was a How can I make things? I was a big, big fan of the Ed Emberley books. And I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you now without those books. They were the best books ever. And still are ...the only books I wanted to check out in the library.

TB: What about those Ed Emberley books did you connect with?

CB: I think I kind of I loved drawing, but I don't think I had confidence sometimes. And those books were the biggest confidence boosters, because if you open up an Ed Emberley book, maybe the first page will say if you can draw these shapes...and it's usually a circle, a square, a rectangle and squiggly line...If you can draw these things, and follow these steps, you can draw anything in the whole world. And, and he broke it down and simplified it and made everything shape-based. And that is still how probably the majority of people draw. You need to start simply and you end up with something elaborate. That was a great confidence booster. Anybody can do it. Anybody can do it.

TB: I remember those books. And I remember I liked to draw as a kid, but I was sort of thrown off by the shapes.

CB: Oh, interesting.

TB: Yeah, I would think that person's not a triangle.

CB: Right.

TB: Because I was looking at the details and the contours, and I actually didn't draw because I'm all about how-to-draw cartoons books, and drawing Comics The Marvel way and...

CB: Ooh. The Marvel way. I was never attracted to those, "here's how to draw realistically." You know I like the more cartoony aspect of things. And simplifying. Just keep it simple. I really like that.

TB: So when you walk around in the world, and this is something I think about a lot as a writer, which is that I'm always trying to come up with language for what I'm seeing as I'm walking around. Are you seeing shapes? Are you seeing 3d images that you can turn around in your head? Or anything like that?

CB: No, because I'm usually getting lost. [Laughter] I'm trying to find my way home. I'm not sure how I see the world honestly. And don't keep a sketchbook. I'm very project-based but you know, Alright, it's time to start a new project. And then I dive in. And I may keep a notebook that keeps all those ideas together about that project. But I'm not good at the practicing part, you know, time to practice, or time to you know haul out that sketchbook and draw something, I

think probably because of my deafness, and the need to always be looking and watching, watchful and paying attention to what people were saying. I think all of my energy goes to that activity when I'm out in the world, that the thought of stopping and you know, taking a deep breath and taking out a beautiful sketchbook and drawing is alien to me.

TB: So when it's time for a project, and you say you're project really project based, are you starting from zero? Starting from the beginning, again?

CB: I think I sort of often am, I kind of enjoy reinventing the wheel for myself. And my husband, Tom, gives me a hard time sometimes for making things harder than they need to be. That's very much my mom is the same way, you know, how can I make this more challenging and harder when it doesn't need to be, but I don't like to doing the same thing twice. When I sign a contract, and they want me to do two book. Ah, no, no, not that, please! I love those one-at-a-time contracts, because I really don't like doing the same thing twice. And so I'm maybe not starting from zero. Because I feel like I keep coming back to the same themes, ultimately, in a lot of my work, but without ever really meaning to I just gravitate back. But maybe I start at a number five.

TB: I like that. In your early years before you were really finding your style, what were you looking at visually, to develop your drawing style? You mentioned cartoons? What were some of the influences on you?

CB: Let's see in the early years...Well, since childhood, I was really crazy about Alice and Martin Provensen, and or Provincen, and how do you pronounce it? Is it Provincen or Provensen?

TB: What I've heard is if you don't know, then you just say it loud!

CB: PROVENSEN! And so their work was very inspiring. They had one book in particular, Our Animal Friends at Maple Hill Farm, that I was obsessed with and still am, and they, basically, the artwork in that book is a black outline for all the animal shapes, filled in with gouache paint, very loosely done, very funny, charming. So that was a huge influence. The Ed Emberly books were just massive. Still. Who else was I looking at?...I was that person who thought, Well, I'm not going to look because I want to do my own unique thing. You know, there was no way to do that. But I was afraid of taking too much from one person. But today I mean today the work out there, there's so much amazing stuff that's inspiring now, but that was a big one. Oh, and Richard Scarry! Oh my gosh! All that stuff, you know, The Busy World...

TB: People don't talk about him enough. Right?

CB: Oh my gosh!

TB: But every kid who had his books looked at them over and over and over.

CB: And over and over again. So many little details and these quirky little bits of humor like all of these pigs sitting around eating a giant hot dog, you know they're eating their own! And I love that stuff, those little little bits of humor. Lowly Worm is easily the most wonderful character in kids' books. He and Sergeant Murphy, the policeman that rode around on a motorcycle, they were my absolute favorite characters. And he was lowly. He was so sweet.

TB: Tell me about when you started because you were, you're an illustrator and a writer and I think your books are one—I don't see a difference between the writing or the illustrating. Tell me about when that started to come together for you? Did you see the books that you would eventually make before you made them? How did you start to arrive at the books that you were making?

CB: Wow, good question. So I feel like in some way that I came to it fairly late in the game, to kid's books. I was working as a freelance illustrator. From home. I had previously had a job that I enjoyed the making things part, but not the window-less office and the boss who was the devil and that kind of thing. So, but I really enjoyed freelance work. And I always had it in the back of my mind, "I would love the kids books." Yeah, but I was having trouble making that connection, in terms of who's gonna hire me to illustrate their books, I never saw myself as a writer, I thought I would just be the illustrator. So anyway, I was working as a freelance illustrator and kind of reading books about—this would have been around the late 90s—reading books about "how to get published!" And something that kept coming up over and over was, you might have a better chance of doing this if you also write the book, and you submit a whole package deal, and you did everything. Okay. But I didn't really have a story. And so it was one of those happy, happy accident kinds of things where I was working on a freelance project. And I have this sock monkey that I made that I love, and still love very deeply. He was essentially, our first child, he went everywhere with us and had his own personality. And my husband and I loved him and took him everywhere for so long that he was really, really filthy. He was really dirty. But I was afraid to stick him in the washing machine, and maybe destroy him. So all this is in my head a little bit. And he happened to be sitting on my desk while I was working. And I looked at him and realized how filthy he was. And suddenly,

for the first time ever, a story popped into my head. And it was basically what would it take to get this monkey clean? And it wasn't hopefully wasn't one of those, you know...I wanted it to be a unique story. And it wasn't just, you know, let's get this monkey in the bath, though it was a little strange. Anyway, I was very lucky and once I put together a really polished book dummy. Oh, yeah, backwards...rewind! I had gotten a book—what's it called, I don't remember the name of it, but it's by Uri Shulevitz. *Writing and Illustrating Books for Children?* (ED: *Writing with Pictures: How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books*) Very generic, but it is the best. It is the best book for getting started. So I had that. So clearly, I was thinking about it. But I used that book to help me figure out how can we make a picture book. So I just followed along and followed his advice, and sent that dummy out to Candlewick Press. And at the time, this was maybe the year 2000. I didn't have an agent, and I just looked online to see what are their requirements. And at the time Candlewick was accepting unsolicited manuscripts, and they were one of the few people that were doing that. So I sort of just blindly sent it off thinking "that's the end of that," and three months later, there was a message on the answering machine, but I couldn't understand the message because I'm a lip reader! But luckily, Tom was there and was able to, he couldn't even repeat it, he was freaking out! But we mis-spelled the editors name and all that stuff, but I was able to make contact with her. And luckily, by this time, we had email in the year 2000 there was email. And that was how I communicated with my editor at that time, and I cannot underscore how much technology, I mean, there's lots of bad things you can say about technology, but the best thing you can say about technology is that it makes things more accessible for so many people. And I wouldn't be in children's books if we didn't have email, because I wasn't gonna be able to have a conversation on the phone, about edits or about any of it. So that was the perfect timing for me to come into it. Because if I had tried to do it five years before, or, you know, when email was not even quite there yet...So if I had tried earlier, I would have been really discouraged and might not have pursued it as hard.

TB: Do you think that's a reason you didn't try earlier?

CB: Probably, like, I know, I'm gonna have to be able to use the phone. How am I gonna do that? And also, the thought of doing something like coming up to New York with a portfolio and all of that and setting that up, the logistics of that. For me at that time in my life, it felt impossible. It felt like "this won't happen." It can't happen. How do I set it up? How am I gonna do it?

TB: What are the steps?

CB: Yes, email is just like the whole world opened up and even, you know, a trip like this one, because of our phone. I have so much more independence now as a 53-year-old than I did, as a you know, as a 23 year old. Or 30. I was 32, I think, when the book came out, that first book.

TB: And you knew, you were always working...your books are almost straight, and then you bend it.

CB: That's the goal.

TB: You know you didn't want to do it straight from the beginning.

CB: From the beginning. Yeah, there was no way you know, I don't want to do a very teach-y book or a didactic book or corny. You know, schmaltzy. No. You know, they always have to be funny. That's the number one thing, it's gotta be funny. It's gotta be weird, the weirder than better! And you really have to fight for the weirdness. You have to. You can't just say, you know, I want to make a weird book and have your editor be okay with that. You have to fight for it. Yeah, that's weird. But the kids are gonna love it. Kids love weird. And I'm proven correct every time.

TB: Especially with weird it's difficult because it's hard to say what the reaction will be. You know, you could say, oh, this is scary. We know what we're gonna get. Or you could say, this is touching and heartfelt and I'm going for some tears. And in your books you're going for: That's funny. And it's weird. And it touches me in a way I wasn't expecting. So you can't anticipate. It's hard to sell that to somebody. It's hard, right? Because there's a feeling you're going for that's a little obscure, right?

CB: Right, the absurdist humor. That's what I'm going for that sort of like absurdity for kid. I mean, all of my favorite stuff growing up was the absurd stuff, you know, the weirder...even the stuff that was kind of off limits like I shouldn't have been watching John Waters you know, those early John Waters movies. Woo! I would eat that up because, wow!

TB: I want to talk about absurdity and about how you push into the absurd because often I know for me, I love absurdity too. Sometimes it just comes by accident. Sometimes that idea comes to me and I think okay, this is good. How do I twist it? But how does the absurd come to you? Is it is it just like the sock monkey where you're you think Oh, that's funny, or do straight ideas come to you ever?

CB: Gosh, I feel like I don't know, I would say, I'll give an example of working on the Smell My Foot. Yes. And the follow up book which was Egg or Eyeball, which is, I think, the best book I've ever written. And it came out during the pandemic. So it didn't get very much traction. But that's the book that when I was working on it, I felt like, Aha, I finally captured it and I got it. This is what I'm going for. But I think it's just my natural state of being, you know, I love making people laugh. I think that's the way I connect with people. I probably feel this need to disarm people a little bit, because I know that first time people, you know, they notice the hearing aids, they notice my speech maybe and so there was like a change in the air when that stuff gets noticed, so my job for me, just to make myself comfortable, is to disarm them with humor. And I've just learned over time that the goofier you act, the better, the bigger the laugh. And absurd and goofy go hand in hand. And that's just my natural state of being, and just kind of, it comes naturally. In the book. I mean, sometimes I have to work for it. Or just push a little harder to get that funny outcome.

TB: To make it snap.

CB: Yes.

TB: So okay, you're in your studio, you're by yourself, you've got a white piece of paper, and got coffee, and you're stressed, and there's a deadline. How do you stay loose? Because you're talking about humor and absurdity as a way of connecting with other people? How do you keep yourself loose on a day to day?

CB: I think, you know, it's good when you rereading the thing, and it's still making you laugh yourself, you know, haha! Gosh, but when I'm by myself. I really like being by myself. I love being by myself, and you just go to this other place in your head. And there is no expectation. I think that part of—I'm not really answering your question. It just feels like you're by yourself. And for me, it's a break. You know, I don't have to I don't have to read anybody's lips. And I don't have to hear if I don't want to. I take my hearing aids out in my studio all the time. So um, I have pretty bad tinnitus, ear ringing, and that's my company. That beeeeeee [High pitched ringing sound]. Like, okay, there it is. You know, I'll say when I write and illustrate, the audience that I have in mind is often my husband, and what's gonna make him laugh, because we have a very similar sense of humor. And I think he's doing the same thing. I can't wait to show this to Tom. Maybe this will get him. You know, we're always trying to get each other and what we call it, I gotcha! You're finally laughing. So he's there. In a way. I want to make sure this makes him laugh first. So that's a big part of what's motivating me. And

the funny thing about the way I work is I'm often this hyper organized, hyper vigilant, very concerned with if I don't work X amount of hours I feel like I have failed the day, which is not always a good place to be, creatively. But if I just say, I'm just gonna keep going. That's awesome. It's in that that seventh hour that the idea comes or the solution comes, or part of my work day is a walk, because the walk will loosen up whatever it is that I'm having trouble with. And I'm very, very strict with myself.

TB: I like that seventh hour idea. Because oftentimes, for me, I'll work all day and it's not coming and I'm frustrated. And I'm trying to force the work to be what I want it to be, and then you take a step back and when you're so frustrated, or whatever it is, you're like, Okay, screw it all. And then oftentimes, you get that irony. You take that step back and you say, there's the irony that comes in that at the end of the day. But you have to do that six hours of crap first.

CB: Absolutely. There's so much crap, but all of it counts! And you know I have a little way of working that I learned from Bob Shea who, I think he struggles with some ADHD. And sometimes I wonder is this was going on with me a little bit. I mean, I have like this hyper-focus but then I'm also out out of it, and he makes these little boxes. And each box represents an hour of time. And you know, the goal is all I have to do is work within one hour, this one box, and then I can put in that little box. Here's what I did in this one hour. And it's a great motivator. I'm just filling in that box. I've worked one hour and then you draw another box. Now what am I going to do in this box and it's very, very overly structured. But somehow that structure helps me be loose, and helps me move on and keep going, not get stuck, not get down. But I do feel like I need to give myself credit for all the other things I'm doing during the day. Like I need supper. I did the laundry. I went to the grocery store.

TB: Those are big things. Especially in day-to-day when you're trying to work. We don't have assistants and servants coming to live for you. That takes up a ton of time. I like that one hour box.

CB: Yeah, you set a timer. And you're like okay, I'm doing just this one thing for one hour. And then before you know it, you're no longer paying attention to the timer. It's two and a half hours later. Boom, you made a breakthrough or maybe you finally in colored that apple red that you've been putting off you know, so it's great way to fight procrastination and to go ahead and do the hard thing, because all you gotta do is do this thing for one hour, and move on.

INTERMISSION

TB: We've been talking with the great bookmaker Cece Bell. Cece has a brand new book out called Animal Albums from A to Z, which combines her love for record covers, hand lettering, weird animals, music, and fantastic design. It's an awesome book and I suggest you check it out immediately. Cece's website is a very relatable work in progress. But you can find her all over the internet and Instagram where she is an excellent poster and commenter. Okay, let's get back to part two.

TB: So your books also are very...because a lot of them are absurd and jokey. They're also kind of delicate, they're very finely balanced. So one thing I'm always wondering when I read books like that, is you kind of can't force those.

CB: Right. You really can't. There are so many books that I have attempted and given up on because there was too much force. And anytime I tried to write something remotely serious...

TB: [laughter]

CB: It sucks. It's just a piece of garbage. Because the voice does not sound genuine to me. El Deafo had serious themes and big emotions. But at its heart I think it's a funny book. My mom would disagree. My mom is like that isn't that funny at all! I lived this!

TB: I'd love to talk about that book, too. But the thing is, I always try to write serious as well. And it I'm a funny person, and you're a funny person, you're gonna be funny no matter what you do.

CB: I can't help it. Yeah. And when I tried. I mean I dedicated, gosh, a long time for me, like a couple of months to this one book, and I said, Oh, it's gonna be deep and heartfelt and meaningful and la la la. And I was really inspired by Peter Brown's Wild Robot. That book is perfect. Yes. And it's beautiful. It's all of those words. I was like, Yeah, I'm gonna do my own Peter Brown book. It was just a pile of garbage, and I've returned to it a couple of times, like, oh, yeah, it was right to give this up. But some of the ideas...there was an egg in that book. And there was a big cat. And those things ended up in Egg or Eyeball.

TB: It's almost like you generated the subject matter. And then you're like, but what do I actually feel about the subject. And you're like, actually, this is how I feel about this. Which is not that serious.

CB: Right.

TB: El Deafo has been so meaningful to so many people, my daughter's one of her favorite books, not just favorite, but like, it's special. It's a special book to kids. Tell me about taking on that project and how it began? And what I'd like to hear is, from you is, what did you think you were going to make? And how did that differ from what you actually wound up making?

CB: That's a very good question. Let's see, the whole thing came to me. Gosh, I was about 40 years old, about 13 years ago, and by the time I was 40, I was still unable to talk about anything to do with my hearing, or lack of. I couldn't say the word deaf. I could barely say, you know, I wear hearing aids. I couldn't say those things. And I was 40! And that's pretty old. And so a bunch of things happened in a weird period of time, where, if I had been able to say those words to the person, then things would have gone a lot more smoothly. And one thing that happens to a lot of people with hearing loss is when you ask for something can be repeated, the person who needs to repeat it get angry. And if you could just say, Ah, I'm deaf, you know, you don't get to be angry with me. But I was not able to do that. And so there were a bunch of things that happened. And in my own anger, I started this website, that was called El Deafo Dot Com. Because El Deafo really was the nickname that I hadn't given myself as a kid. Personal, just privately, I didn't tell anybody anything. And I did not really see myself as a caped superhero. But it's just like, Yeah, I'm strong, I can do that kind of nickname. But anyway, El Deafo Dot Com was more me as an adult talking to other adults about, here's what to do if you meet a deaf person who is like me and wears hearing aids and is a lip reader. Here's what to do. Here's how to be with them. Here are some rules. So I had several posts about that. And then I decided to write one post about my childhood. And that post became El Deafo the book. And I have a very good friend named Madeline Rosenberg, who was reading and following along and she read the childhood posts, and said, Man, you got to make a graphic novel out of this. And so it was really her idea. And I had read Smile by Raina Telgemeier. That book, of course, none of these graphic novels wouldn't be here without Raina it feels like at least the middle grade ones. And that was basically what got me started. And I think the way it is as a book, it's pretty close. It is what I wanted it to be, it turned out right. But the initial version of it, it felt a little bit younger, the artwork look younger, and my editor, Susan Van Metre, who took on the project, that was her main thing was "this book is more like a picture book. Picture Book art, can you can you age it up?" And that was hard for me at first because it definitely looks like it was drawn by me. But I really had to push to figure out how to draw it to make it feel older.

TB: In the book. It starts when you're, like, four. Do you think it's possible you were sort of trying to draw pictures that were almost for like a four year old at first? Sort of like talk to yourself almost?

CB: Probably. Yeah, I think you're right. I think that could have been part of it. And it just felt more natural to draw that way at that time. But in the end, I'm, like, really happy with the way it turned out. The hardest part is were making sure that I was honest about all of it. And there was one chapter in there. The hardest chapter to write, by far was chapter nine, I think it's chapter nine, which is about sign language. And I have a very, very specific relationship to sign language, especially when I was a kid. And how do I write this chapter about sign language? Which is me as a kid being being a total jerk about it. Being totally negative. Hating it? Absolutely hating it, rejecting it. How do I write this chapter, and still make it somehow clear to the reader that it was me with the problem and not sign language? And oh, man, I mean, the number of edits and changes and refiguring, but I had to put that chapter in, it has to be in there. And then I also got to write in afterward to talk about that chapter a little bit more. And that was probably the most difficult part. And the fear of what is the deaf community going to think of that book? Because I had this chapter in there. And it's also such a personal, individual story. What's going to happen next, that was terrifying. I would lie awake at night just frantic with worry about, you know, "please, please, please, don't be upset with me." You know, "please don't feel insulted. Please remember, it's just me." And it was just so hard to let it go and let it be in the world.

TB: Because you felt like you were representing and you didn't want to misrepresent?

CB: Exactly. Not at all. And I think it feels like, I think that happens with a lot of us who are writing these personal stories that encompass some kind of thing, like in this case, a disability. And this happens with me, I'll read a book, and there's deafness in it. And the character's experience of deafness isn't like mine. And I'll be like, "Oh, that's not right." And then I remember, "Oh, wait, you know, that's that person, this is me." And you just get so excited to see yourself there, to see any aspect of yourself, that when it doesn't pan out exactly the same...like, "wait, this isn't right." But it is right for that person. But for the most part, I think it was very well received by lots of people, but including lot's of people in the deaf community, which absolutely, a huge relief.

TB: That's wonderful. One thing I was thinking about is, you know, when musicians watch a movie, or when skateboarders watch a movie about

skateboarding, “that's not how you skateboard,” and they get very upset. Because finally, like, is almost, there's that thing where, “hey, this is my life. This is how I live it. Right now I get to see it. And there's something that's not right about it.”

CB: Exactly. And it can be frustrating.

TB: It's a lot bigger than skateboarding.

CB: Exactly. Exactly. So that was what was challenging about the book was worrying, the worry, the anxiety of how is this going to be received, not by the rest of the world, just by other deaf people, you know. It's so important to me to not insult anybody for the way that they are doing their own deafness. Though I'm much, much more magnanimous about sign language now, and have learned a little bit even I mean, I just had a real chip on my shoulder about it.

TB: I like that phrase, “how they're doing their deafness.” That's fascinating to me, because it is such an individual set of decisions and options. And so for you, this was hundreds of pages of illustrations and panels and the hard part was writing. The coming up with the compositions — was that was that a challenge for you?

CB: It was, especially in the beginning, because I had never done a graphic novel before. And I read Scott McCloud's book *Understanding Comics* three whole times before I really jumped in. That book is the only thing you need if you're getting started. I'd love that book.

TB: We want to get him on this show. But he's too big for us.

CB: Oh, get him on the show. He's so important to the field. But I think the biggest challenge I had in the beginning was trying to do too much on one page, too many panels. I needed to pace myself and settle down, and then just let it breathe. And then let it be what it was going to be. But then once I got going, I had a real rhythm going, where you know, I'd kind of sketch it out, figure out who says what, and it was all very organic, it's very different from making a picture book where everything feels like it needs to be absolutely perfect, tied up neatly in a bow. With graphic novels, I'll just shove another panel in there or rearrange that. Or make this character say that instead of this character and it all just sort of organically comes together. But the actual, I have to ink this thing and finish it, it felt like a very long tunnel, a very, very long tunnel.

TB: It's interesting to hear you describe it as loose, because when I think of people writing, making graphic novels, it seems tight and organized. But for you, it was it's a lot looser than a picture book.

CB: Very much. The planning, the getting it figured out is the best part of the process. How do I do just this one page? What is the best way to show this big moment? And it all just sort of starts falling into place. And then when it doesn't fall into play, because it's not a picture book, you feel like, "okay, I'm just gonna get ready, this panel, boom, problem solved. Or I need one extra panel to make this make sense." It's challenging, but it's very fun. It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle. And trying to get those pieces just right.

TB: Let's talk about your newest book. Tell us a little bit about it. Because this is a different book for you.

CB: It's a very different book for me, because it's not as much story based, but it's funny! It's called Animal Albums from A to Z. And it's an alphabet book about music. And each letter of the alphabet is represented by a fake album cover. And each letter is its own genre. And there are animal musicians who play the instruments and, and do that. So every spread of the book has an album cover. And then it has song lyrics from each album. Ultimately, we ended up making working with a bunch of musicians, over 60, I think, to create actual music to go with each. It's fun, there's a QR code in a title page that kid can go to, and that takes you to a website, and they can hear on a different phone, in 26 different genres. Waaa!

TB: So what made you want to make a book about music? Tell me about how this started, because it's such a fascinating project. And it's different and it's wild. And there's musicians involved. And just I'd love to hear how this came to you?

CB: I have always loved music. And it's sort of the book I thought of my very subtle attempt, or maybe not that subtle, to remind people that, again, disabilities on a spectrum, and I'm deaf person who wears hearing aids, and my hearing aids allow me to hear and appreciate music, and it's probably not even close to perfect, but the right song is always great. And so I grew up listening to my parents vinyl collection, which was the weirdest hodgepodge. We had Helen Reddy, and we had we had all these ballet albums, and that was my mom's stuff. And then we had all this Dixieland jazz from my dad, and a lot of Christmas albums, and just a little bit of everything. And I was the lucky kid with an older brother who got all these albums from a store called the Records Exchange. And he was coming home with The Beatles, and the Rolling Stones and all Burt

Bacharach, Carpenters stuff, kind of pop, easy listening stuff. I was listening to all that. And so I had a very deep level of that. And then I was in the marching band and the concert band and the jazz band and just really loved music. And the idea sort of came to me organically, because I really wanted to make an alphabet book, didn't know what to do, and was randomly drawing squares one day thinking that I would fill the square, each little square with everything that starts with the letter A, you know, one square would be an antelope, and then another square would have an apple in it. But as I was drawing those squares, I thought, "oh, wait a minute, square, and then album cover." And so it all sort of evolved from that.

TB: Yeah, and specifically a record cover, which are coming back in a lot of ways. And that great album art, which we've lost in so many ways, but I think people are appreciating fantastic album art again.

CB: They are. Analog is making a comeback. LPs are making a comeback.

TB: Well for some people they never went away.

CB: Right, exactly. They never went away for me. No, no, we inherited. When my parents moved out of their big house, we got their record player from the 60s. And these fantastic speakers. I mean, ah, they're beautiful. The ones with the tubes in them, those old school 60s, they're just fantastic. And so, you know, getting the listen to album all over again with that setup has been so much fun.

TB: Okay, so I wanted to ask you about ideas. Now, here you are, you've done a book, and it's coming out soon. Let's say you don't have anything next. And you're looking at, you know, get up in the morning and you go to your desk, and there's nothing on it. What do you do to sort of get ideas going? Or how does it feel when an idea comes to you that you think "this is a book?" Or it could be a book? What do you do with it? At that point? Does it come in words or images or both?

CB: I actually have a little bit of a process for that. It's kind of loose, but I like to take walks and good long walks, then when I'm by myself on a walk, sometimes have what I think are okay ideas. And when I get back home, I will write them down. It's always words, it's never rarely pictures. I'll write it down on a scrap of paper. And then I just put that piece of paper in a drawer and forget about it. So that when it is time, when I get to that point where I need an idea, I don't have anything, I open up that drawer and I have all the little scraps of paper. And I just look at them again. And then the one that kind of floats my boat at the moment is

often the one that gets pulled out. But another thing that happens that's even better. There will be two very separate ideas, or three, and you stick them together. And you've got comedy gold, or whatever! And that's how I ended up with my book, Bee-Wigged. Because I had one idea which I want to do a book about a very, very large child-sized bee. That was one idea. And the other idea was I would like to do a book about a wig. And those two ideas came together. Because the very large bee ends up wearing a wig. And then there was a magical twist at the end. So I have this this drawer and then I'll have files that abandoned books that I mentioned, I mean that's still does grist for the mill.

TB: Okay, when you abandon a project, do you ever go back to them?

CB: I do. I go back to them. And every time it's the same. It was right for me to abandon it. Always! I've never re-started a project I don't think. But then I'll look at it and think "What do I like?" Maybe there's a little bit you know, like the cat and the egg ended up in Egg or Eyeball. Maybe there's something from the this I might be able to use but I like holding on to them. And I like revisiting them. Because you know, maybe, but almost every time or absolutely no.

TB: It's a funny thing, because you'll look at an abandoned project and you think, "Gosh, for three months, I really tried hard on this, right?" I really was working hard on it, and there's gotta be something. And I liked that you can say to yourself, because sometimes with abandoned projects, you're like, "I'll just go back and do this thing"...that never works. But I like to hear you say, What do I like from this? Because you were working? You know, you thought at one point this is going to be a book!

CB: And there's also great pleasure in simply throwing something in the trash. I mean, I take great pleasure in that. "This is crap. See you later!" But, but there's the ones that I hold on to, you know, there is something. And there is there is one in particular that I just wish I could make it work. But I haven't figured that out yet.

TB: This is something that Jane Yolen said, and I find it kind of haunting. And she says, Sometimes an idea comes to you, but you're not ready as an artist for it. It's better than you are at the moment.

CB: [Laughs] I've never had an idea that was better than me! No, mine are kind like "maybe that's okay!" That's really interesting. I think you have to know there's a feeling that comes when you know it's worth pursuing, and maybe you do end up pursuing something that you thought was worth pursuing. And it doesn't pan out. But your job is to just sort of...survive. Accept that. I don't know. I'm not really

saying that right. But like, you know, you're the medium for this thing. Maybe it's worth pursuing. Maybe it's not.

TB: And you feel the spirit, as the medium. There's a heavy spirit there, or whatever. But there's a channel.

CB: Yeah, you channel! That's the word!

TB: Okay. Last question was, is there anything that you would tell yourself, when you were just starting out, or at any point in your drawing and making life that you wish you'd learned earlier?

CB: That I wish I'd learned earlier? Don't worry about it. Don't worry so much. Yeah, it's a reminder that I still have to say, no, don't be so hard on yourself. You know, don't worry. It will all work out.

OUTTRO

TB: That's all the time we have today in our show. On behalf of all of us at SCBWI, I'd like to thank Cece for making the time to talk with us. If you've liked what you've heard, please subscribe to our totally free show and leave us some stars. And please head over to SCBWI.ORG if you want to learn more about the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. This episode was produced by Chelsea Kimiko Hall and edited by Samantha Thomas. And this podcast is made possible with support from the Authors Coalition of America. Thanks for listening this week. And we'll see you again next week. Hopefully, so long.