

Anne Nesbet, Berkeley Book Chats, November 7, 2018

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities.

Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Today's conversation features Diego Pirillo of the Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures and Program in Film Studies discussing her book *The Orphan Band of Springdale*.

She is joined by Kristen Whissel of the Department of Film & Media.

Kristen Whissel: Thanks to everybody for coming. I thought I'd begin just by describing the plot of *Orphan Band of Springdale* very quickly and then letting Anne read the first few pages so that you can get a sense of the really remarkable sort of narrator's voice that she has and also to sort of set the stage, to give you some context for understanding what the book is about. *Orphan Band of Springdale* focuses on an 11-year-old protagonist named Augusta Hoopes Neubronner who is fleeing New York with her father, who was a labor organizer. And she finds herself on a bus alone, headed to Maine to live with her grandmother Hoopes who runs a home for orphans. And her grandmother and her aunt live there with six or seven other children, some of whom are orphans and some of whom only seem to be orphans. I will leave it there and allow Anne to read the first few pages.

Anne Nesbet: I want to welcome everyone here and just say how grateful I am to Kristen and Isla for coming for the stereophonic questioning, it's absolutely exciting for me. The first chapter is called "What Happened in Portland."

Anne Nesbet: "Augusta Neubronner hadn't expected to be on a bus in Maine when she lost her father. She hadn't expected to be sitting alone, scrunched up next to the dark blue coat of a woman she didn't know or to have her French horn case balanced between her ankles or for the weight of a night's worth of not sleeping to be pulling at her eyelids and making her mind slow and stupid just at the moment when she needed to be even more alert than her usual quick brain self. Things never happen the way we imagine them ahead of time. "Sit here," her father had said, hardly a moment ago. They hadn't meant to come late to the Portland-Springdale bus of course, but they'd been riding buses all day and all night, New York to Boston and then waiting in Boston and then Boston to Portland, and then in the waiting room here in Portland. And the truth was they must both have nodded off, even her father. That must've been what happened.

Anne Nesbet: So then there was a hurry to the bus and other people already on board and her father had pushed her scruffy suitcase onto the rack above her head and said, "Sit here," so she'd done so next to this woman with the scratchy blue coat. And then he had said something else, something urgent and hard to hear and dashed right back off the bus again. Why? He'd said something, so it must have been an explanation. Had he gone to grab a cup of coffee? He was tired out, they were both so tired out. And he did like the bitter taste of coffee, but coffee wasn't

worth risking missing their bus, was it? Gusta took a ragged breath and squinted toward the front of the bus, willing him to come bounding up the steps again. She would know him anywhere, just from the way he moved, with impatience like springs in the soles of his feet and his shoulder's always tense, ready to push boulders aside if boulders appeared.

Anne Nesbet: "Hurry up, Papa," she told him. Two men did come swinging up the steps then, but neither one of them moved like her father. Their eyes looked like mysterious dark pools to Gusta. They stood at the front of the bus looking at all the tired people sitting there waiting to be on their way to Springdale, and they said in terrible hard voices, "August Neubronner," which was Gusta's father's name. And then they started moving down the aisles looking at all the men who might be August Neubronner and as they brushed by Gusta, paying no attention to her because she was just a scrawny 11-year-old girl tucked up next to a woman in a blue coat, she saw that the dark pools were actually dark glasses and the men were in uniforms, and that was how she knew the thing they'd been dreading and expecting all these months, even years, was actually really happening. Not in some shadowy future, but right now, for real in 1941."

Kristen Whissel: If any of you have read Anne Nesbet's previous book, *Cloud and Wallfish*, you'll note that both of these books begin with her young protagonists being whisked away in vehicles that are speeding her protagonists away from everything they know. From home, from the very stable identities that they get from home and parents, towards a new place that's unfamiliar to them, and where they are regarded as strange and even foreign. And it's a very unique way of starting off a book, I think because it's almost as if the reader is grabbed by the collar and dragged onto that bus and plopped down onto the seat next to the woman in the scratchy coat. My first question to you is, why do you begin these books in motion, in kind of panic motion, and in this case, why do you begin with Gusta and her father in flight, and why 1941?

Anne Nesbet: Why start in flight? Partly that's because of something I remember hearing in a graduate seminar. I think it was Russian literature or something back long ago and I had this very unforgiving and demanding professor. And every time you turned in a seminar paper, he would come back to you and he'd say, "Well, I think really you should have started on the last page and gone from there." So I was very hyperaware from the academic side that most of what we do in the first pages of things, most of our introductions and so on, we need them when we're writing drafts. But eventually they have to go. And as someone who grades papers now a lot, I see that too. So I see that as a practitioner of writing openings and also someone who reads a lot of other people's openings.

Anne Nesbet: Of course that's true for fiction as well, that you want someone to be on the journey with your character right away and both of these characters, as Kristen was pointing out, are being plopped into completely new worlds. The book before this was called "Cloud and Wallfish" and it starts with a kid being picked up at elementary school in Virginia and being told, well he always thought his name was Noah but it's actually Jonah and his birthday is different and by the way we're going to the airport, we're going to be flying off to this very strange place, which turns out to be East Germany in 1989. Okay, so his life is completely changed. And here we have someone who thinks she's traveling with her father who's going to drop her off at her grandmother's orphan home and the father is heading on his way trying to escape the country via Canada.

Anne Nesbet: He's a sort of Harry Bridges characters so he's a labor organizer trying to escape the increasingly oppressive laws about that and he comes from Germany and is a communist and so he does not want to be deported in 1941 back to Germany. She

suddenly finds herself being dumped onto this bus and then dumped into this world she didn't know, the place run by her grandmother. So why 1941? This story started as a family story. My mother came from Maine, her family came from Maine, and the hardscrabble inland rural farming part of Maine, no ocean in sight anywhere. We used to go back to the farm in the summers always and we'd be driving along to the place where we set up our tents and my mom would always point to this sort of ramshackle large building on the side of the road and she'd say, "Oh, that's the orphan home I lived in when I was a kid."

Anne Nesbet: "What?" "Yeah, that's the orphan home my grandmother ran where I was sent as a kid whenever things got bad in my family." Then time passed and my mom died but I started thinking, what was that story all about? And I started digging into it and indeed it turns out you can look in the census records and so on, you can find that my great-grandmother ran this orphan home and my mom used to go and stay there when things were bad, and it was all to cover up a family secret. There was a child born to an aunt, and so that they didn't have to send the child away, they called the child an orphan and then they brought in a whole bunch of orphans to disguise it.

Anne Nesbet: And so for decades they ran an orphan home in order to keep this child who did not know she was not an orphan, to raise her up. So that was the core of the story here. And then when I was thinking about what date to set it in, my mom's roughly the age of Gusta in the book, maybe a little younger because she was born in 1933, but I was thinking what date would be good for fiction? And I thought, oh, well it's southern Maine, so the fair is going to be a big deal. Every time we went there all summer, everyone was always preparing for the Afton Fair, county fair. That always happened right after we left so we never got to see the results of the preparation, but we heard about it all the time. So I was like, any book set in Maine, it's got to be all about something to do with the fair.

Anne Nesbet: Then I thought okay, so that means I can't do it during the war because I knew that during the war they hadn't had the fair. So I said I'll do it the year before we joined the war so that there's still a fair, 1941. So I chose 1941. Then I went and looked in the Sanford-Springvale Historical Society's archives and read through the entire run of the Sanford Tribune from 1941, and by gum there were so many interesting things going on in the year 1941. We'll get to some of those, but the irony is that when we got to August, suddenly there was this notice that the fair was canceled because a New York outfit was being brought in instead to do Vaudeville, which they spelled V-O-D-V-I-L, and clearly there had been some under the table financial transactions betraying the people of York County, Maine in 1941.

Anne Nesbet: So instead of having an actual fair, I got to work in a betrayed fair as a little bit of a plot point here. But 1941 I chose because it was before the war, right before the war. So I thought it'd be interesting to see what is happening as you're heading towards a war you kind of know is coming. And I wanted there to be a fair but there wasn't.

Isla Hager: So when you are writing your novels for middle graders, how do you get into the mind of an 11-year-old protagonist and how do you understand the way that 11-year-old sees and experiences the world?

Anne Nesbet: That's always a challenge. It's not as big a challenge as you would think because I think, inside myself, I'm pretty much the age of my characters in these books. When I first started writing novels, I thought I was going to be writing sophisticated science fiction for grownups. And somehow, everybody would read those manuscripts and they'd say, not sophisticated enough or something

like this. But when I wrote my first book for kids, it was like falling into place and I think the thing is I don't write simply as my 11-year-old self because I know what I wrote when I was 11 or 12 and it was different. It sounded quite different. The thing that I'm always trying to do is to respect the perspective of my protagonist and also have these other points of views. So there tends to be a narrative voice that's not exactly the same as the perspective of the character and I like the feeling of that interaction.

Kristen Whissel: Again, here's another similarity between "Orphan Band" and "Cloud and Wallfish" is that you sort of flop your protagonists down at moments of real historical change and, in this book, the Alien Registration Act comes up, anti-German sentiment in the US, there are references to the labor movement and to the depression. One of my questions is, all of these things are sort of integrated so well into the story of Gusta and her family, her mother and father, but then the story of Springdale itself and I'm just wondering, why do you choose these moments of radical change as a kind of context for, you know... an 11 or 12-year-old experiencing radical change themselves too. They're no longer children but not quite adults and your protagonists are learning how to become themselves.

Kristen Whissel: There's that question, these kinds of historical moments, and then also how do you do that so effectively, bring together the broader historical context with these smaller stories?

Anne Nesbet: The answer to the last one is that it never starts effectively at first. There's always a certain brutal montage aspect where you've got these different things that you're trying to corral and make speak to each other in your story and so whatever works is the result of twelve revisions or something. But I do care very much about those historical moments where things are changing. As I say it to students when I go to visit schools, guess what guys, like Noah, who gets dragged off to East Germany and it turns out to be 1989, like Gusta, who's suddenly in Maine in 1941, you too are living in history. This is this time right now, it's history, for all the good sides and bad sides of that.

Anne Nesbet: As I remember being 10, 11 and 12, that was a time where you always felt like everything meant being peeled out and being plopped into something where you didn't know all the rules and you didn't know how everything was working and you could tell that there was all this stuff going on in the air all around us. When I was that age, it was Vietnam and the peace movement, but you definitely had this incredible sense that all of these things were going on, these big things and you were trying to kind of catch up with that. But you were also always being thrust into a new world just by having a body that was changing and feeling... you used to be able to get along with these kids and now you're in the next grade and what are these conversations like now and so on and so forth.

Anne Nesbet: That disorientation is something that we experience in our lives again and again, but also in moments, in historical moments. It's so important for kids to read about history. That's something that gets really shortchanged, generally speaking, in school. I don't know if that's still true, but when I was in school we didn't really go very far. Where would you say you've gone up to in history?

Isla Hager: Ancient Islam?

Kristen Whissel: That's great, but not much in the 20th century and nothing in the 21st.

Anne Nesbet: Right, and I'm going to talk to kids in schools about the Cold War, 1989, what happened after the Second World War? Or what about nationalism, how have

we treated immigrants over the years? And of course nobody has had any of this, but they're really interested in it. That's the thing that's very encouraging to me, kids are really interested in those things. For instance, in "Cloud and Wallfish," every chapter ends with what I call a secret file and then we go into usually more nitty gritty about the historical context. I call it a secret file, though, because we're in east Germany and it's all about spying and also because studying history is a way of spying. You're spying on the past, you're digging into it, it's fun and it's exciting. So I want to get that kind of archival fever going in the fifth graders.

- Anne Nesbet: The editors, of course, the publishers were very nervous about the secret files, and when they first showed me the way that they would set up the book, they had the fictional part of the chapter in nice type and then they used this icky little font for the secret files part about the history. And I was like, no, no, no. If I had charge of everything, I would have it be in like gold, glittery, whatever because we want everyone to realize this is the fun part. They didn't exactly go with the gold glitter, but they did change the font and what's heartening again for me is that kids have responded really positively to the secret files.
- Kristen Whissel: Were you irritated by the files or did you enjoy them?
- Isla Hager: I liked them a lot.
- Kristen Whissel: So what was it that you liked about them?
- Isla Hager: I liked having the story and then having the history part of the story to connect them both.
- Kristen Whissel: Because they do obviously talk to each other.
- Isla Hager: Yeah.
- Anne Nesbet: I think it's sort of nice, at least that was my idea to have them right there and not have like... you know, sometimes in a book in the back there'll be a few educational pages.
- Kristen Whissel: I should say that when Isla would get into the car after I picked her up, she was in fifth grade when she read it, she would close the door and look at me and say, "The wall comes down, right? I remember you talking about the wall coming down but does it come down in 1989?" And she'd read on the way home just to make sure.
- Anne Nesbet: Okay, so that's the writer's advantage-
- Kristen Whissel: The fact that history is taught so poorly in this country.
- Anne Nesbet: There's still a lot of suspense, right?
- Kristen Whissel: Right. She knew but she didn't know if it was going to happen for "Cloud and Wallfish."
- Isla Hager: At the beginning of the story, Gusta is this tiny frail girl with a big French horn and she loves it, but it's also a burden. She's very quiet and she obeys her father who tells her it's her job to say nothing. But by the end of the book, Gusta finds her voice and she speaks out, but it seems like playing the French Horn first allowed her to express herself and find her voice. Why did you choose the

French horn and what inspired you to use a musical instrument as a metaphor for Augusta's ability to express herself.

Anne Nesbet: Thank you for that question. I'm so glad you liked the French horn. I was raised to have enormous respect for the French horn because my mother played the French horn actually. My mother was, like Gusta, sent off to live in this orphan home and, like Gusta, she came from an incredibly poor family. She went to, I think it was eleven different schools in her 12 years before college because the family could never pay the rent, so they would just hang out in a town until the rent came due and then eventually they would move to the next town. So that was her childhood, but somehow she became a French horn player.

Anne Nesbet: It's not the obvious instrument for someone who's brutally poor because they're expensive and you have to cart it around. Someone had to care, someone had to give her lessons, how did this happen? I will never know because she's gone and I can't ask her. She started playing it when she was younger and she became so good that in the last two years of high school, which were the only two she had in one place, which was Rutland, Rutland High School, she was the youngest member of the Vermont Symphony playing the French horn.

Anne Nesbet: Something happened there, so the French horn was not chosen randomly. But then it turns out that it was the perfect instrument because it's big and brassy and she's not, and it's also incredibly difficult to play. The thing my mother always impressed upon us was that you had to have these really good lips to do it and you had to work really hard to build up that muscle control, and she would let us try and we would completely fail and then she would show that she still had it and could make sounds come out of this. So I think making the fact that finding a voice is not easy, even though it may be easier psychologically in some ways, to have your voice first come through an instrument, playing a French horn is not an easy way to achieve this brassy voice. So you're already overcoming all sorts of things to make it sound.

Anne Nesbet: The other thing that's amazing about the French horn, when I started writing, I borrowed my mom's French horn from my sister who had it and I started doing YouTube videos on how to play and I started talking to the French hornists in my orchestra, that kind of stuff. It's so interesting because French horn is really one of these instruments where you have to know where you're headed, what the note is. You have to sort of hear it in your head before you go because, it's not each key is a different note, you have to know which version, which of the many notes that this configuration can provide, you're aiming for.

Anne Nesbet: It's like one big metaphor, the French horn, and also very lovely. And as you say, it's a burden because it's heavy, it's about one of the most awkward... of course, I have a kid who plays the cello, but even then I don't think she suffered as much from lugging the cello around as my mom and Gusta suffered from a French horn case, which really will do you damage as you walk through the room.

Kristen Whissel: It was very much her father too.

Anne Nesbet: And it's all about her father.

Kristen Whissel: This moral burden that she kind of carries with her. She talks about worker's comp and there's a big plot point around that and to sort of do the right thing and the clear light of trouble will find out who we are. And so there's a way that even though he disappears, as long as she has that horn in good and bad ways.

Anne Nesbet: In good and bad ways. Because he's a complicated character. She kind of hero worships him in one sense, but he's also actually abandoning them so it's mixed. He's an idealist and we know what that's like sometimes for the family. He was also a communist, but pretty patriarchal in certain respects as well. This, I knew from local experience growing up, I would say.

Kristen Whissel: Since we talked a little bit about music, I'm wondering, and this will sort of introduce Anne's dual careers as both a film scholar and as a novelist, she's one of these ridiculously talented people. So optics and vision are also really important themes in this book and you sort of got a sense of that in the opening passages that Anne read. Gusta sort of sees the pools of darkness and only realizes when the men come closer that they're wearing sunglasses. So there are all sorts of myopic people in this book and vision becomes perspective, and vision and seeing things differently is a really important metaphor. But there's also pigeon photography and aviation and there's even the idea of good vision as a matter of patriotism in 1941. So sort of bringing your film scholarship and history of optics into play here with your fiction writing, can you talk a little bit about images and optics and seeing?

Anne Nesbet: It's really hard to know which comes first but when I was reading through the entire run of the paper in 1941, it was striking to me how many of these themes appear there. They were busy building a new airport outside this little town and it was unclear whether the government was perhaps being swindled by the people who were clearing the land, probably right? And there was a lot of stuff about aviation and, we're working towards, again, the Second World War. They were trying to enlist people to become aviation cadets.

Anne Nesbet: There were photographs in the newspaper of these incredibly fancy optometry school scale eye devices, lenses and stuff, where you sort of look like a Cyborg and you look through it and they had those machines in town because they were trying to gauge people's eyesight to make them aviation cadets, et cetera, et cetera. Then I was really fascinated by pigeons, I've always been interested in pigeons and it's a little side light of a film history that pigeon photography really was a big thing. There are these incredible images by a chemist named Neubronner, they were taken by pigeons and some of them you have aerial views that then have a little bit of wing in them. Which is my favorite slide of the whole semester for film history part one, because what you have there is a pigeon selfie, which is great.

Anne Nesbet: I've always been interested in the aerial view and throughout film history, all of those attempts to see the world from a different perspective which is always a combination of a figurative and literal thing. It's always tangled up. How we see the world does say something about the light in which we see the world, the figurative way we see the world. And I remember being fascinated by that from childhood. I would set up little scenes using Fisher-Price characters and blocks and then I would try to get down and see it from the perspective of what if I were this tall, what would this table look like here? I was always looking at that with fascination. Or lying on the piano bench and hanging my head over so that I could see the whole room upside down.

Anne Nesbet: What would it be like if things were like this? And so I think one of the reasons I rejoiced to discover film as a scholarly avenue of study was that we could talk about those things, about all the wonderful weird ways we see things. Which always goes back to that great mystery of what does it mean to be me and not you, how is what my brain is putting together from all this visual information different from what you're seeing. And in this book we just go to town exploring all these different ways of seeing. One of the challenges for me as a writer and

something I really enjoy, is that she is incredibly near sighted and only gets glasses eventually. That was something that came out of a family story because my mom was also incredibly near sighted and they were too poor, as previously described, and so she didn't get glasses until she was in fifth grade and she said she remembered walking out of the building, looking up and realizing for the first time that there were leaves on trees, she had had no idea.

Anne Nesbet: We all grew into our glasses, but again, as with the French horn with respect and affection, we loved our glasses because they let us see, we had that attitude from my mom. For a writer it was really fun to be writing her whole experience of this new place from a near sighted point of view but a near sighted point of view that doesn't know it's near sighted. She knows she's near sighted, but she just doesn't know how badly she's seeing because that's the way she sees. And so to write that, and then you get to have the chance to write what it's like when you put the glasses on eventually, what that is like... and for her from all sorts of perspectives. She's learning about different ways of seeing the world and about all these different people around her who themselves have different ways of seeing the world.

Anne Nesbet: That even expands out to things like bats for instance. I think an early draft title of this was "Bats and Pigeons" because those are two things that have different perspectives on the world. You have the pigeon who's always trying to go home and sees things from an aerial perspective. And then you have bats, and I've always been fascinated by echolocation. But what does that mean? What would that feel like, echolocation? I remember as a kid being fascinated by that, too. And as someone who couldn't see very well, wouldn't that be sort of interesting, that it's almost like your fingers are infinitely long and you're kind of feeling the space around you so it all gets tangled up.

Speaker 1: You mentioned that your family had a secret which was behind the orphanage and I'm wondering how you, I'm assuming you somehow have that secret into the book and if so, how did that present itself?

Anne Nesbet: Well, yes, you could request it at your library and see.

Speaker 1: Is that a spoiler?

Anne Nesbet: One of the things that's important here in this story is that her family is just riddled with secrets. Her father's secrets, the mother and father thing, and then this orphan home is built around a great secret and you have Gusta who is trying to kind of live up to what she thinks of as her father's ideals of being forthright and direct and fighting for justice and all this. And she keeps just stepping into trouble that way because it turns out secrets are complicated things, and sometimes when they come out, you get a mixed result. Like it might not all be good. So that's something that she certainly runs into in here in a big way.

Speaker 2: Could you talk a little about what a young adult novel is stylistically? When you're writing this, what can't you write? What is the form, the idea of the literary that you can't or can do that separates it from adult novels?

Anne Nesbet: That's a super difficult question actually because actually what I write is not technically called young adults. The technical category is middle grade. I don't like that name because it always seems like you got a B-. There are middle schools. When I was younger we went to junior high. So middle grade novel, what is that? It's like any of those charts, it's like how do you define something? You can sort of say what it's not, but even then you can break a lot of those rules.



So what is okay to talk about and what is not okay to talk about in these different kinds of books? All of those are really flexible boundaries.

Anne Nesbet: Roughly speaking, those categories have been so shaped by Barnes & Noble, who likes to file books by nine to twelve and teen. So there's this sort of gulf between what they're calling middle grade, which are the books that Barnes & Noble will file as nine to twelve, and then there's the teen ones where there are more vampires and bare chests. But all of that are these generalizations that have as many exceptions as they do. I'm always doing things a little weirdly so I kind of push the edge on the middle grade. These are fairly long and complicated Books.

Anne Nesbet: You might call this upper middle grade, sort of me making things difficult for myself, marketing wise. But usually they are about kids who are in that part of their lives where they are beginning to think about the wider world, having adventures and developing friendships that mean a lot. And so what we don't have a lot of is romance exactly, which might generally speaking be more in the YA section. But again, as far as topics go, almost anything will go in any of these depending on how you do it.

Speaker 3: Let's talk also about the form, as you're writing this as a writer. What are you able to do and not able to do, do you find yourself having to think about or hold yourself back or find other ways?

Anne Nesbet: I don't ever feel that I'm having to hold myself back because you're just always trying to do the very best thing you can do and be as interesting with the language as you can possibly be, so I'm never holding back. Sometimes an editor will come in and say that reference to the 18th century french chemist, is that, really? And I'll be like, yes, yes, kids like that. Remember how much kids liked Madeleine L'engle's reference to the mitochondria or something and then they go and find out there really is such a thing even if actually little creatures aren't dancing in it. Sometimes there'll be little references, but the language is pretty complicated, that I use.

Anne Nesbet: I just do that because I think that's great. I mean I think kids are ready for language to be going full boar. I think kids love real poems for instance. I used to go into the second grade classroom of my kid and we'd read Yates together and stuff and they liked it. Poems are great for that because there's real language but concentrated. So it's not so daunting, it's right there and you can go through it. I'm kind of pushing back on having to hold back. I think the things that I do think about is I'll say, oh Nesbet, you should really make your chapter's a little shorter, that's my goal. My goal is always to make the books a little shorter. Sort of failing. But the one that's coming out next is shorter so far and it's about a silent film heroin during the adventure cereal craze of 1914.

Kristen Whissel: So what's happens, like there's plot and everything?

Anne Nesbet: I do have some of those but whenever I have a goal for things being simple and clear, it's also me having that goal so the language is never dumbed down.

Kristen Whissel: And you also make it historically specific. I mean the dialogue is from 1941 and you don't pull back on that either, you're faithful to the local dialect and the historically specific language.

Anne Nesbet: Actually there was a lot of research that went into there too. A lot of it was triangulating between reading things from the time, going through things from

the time, and family stuff. On the language, I got a bunch of books that were about the Maine dialect in the '40s. I went through it, read dictionaries of things that people would say in Maine and I wrote lists of the ones that I remembered hearing my mother use so it was like double checking. It had to be something that sounded like it would come out of my mom's mouth, but I don't try to imitate the phonic structure of that amazing downeast dialect here because I think that's always going to fail in some way or other. I'd rather have it be that there are touches of the kinds of phrases and words that I remember hearing in Maine or from my mom.

Speaker 4: I want to ask two things about your process of writing these novels. First is, do you have the entire plot mapped out in advance and then you kind of execute it or do you just start with a character and then see where the writing takes you? I've heard some novelists say that their characters kind of speak to them and tell them what's happening next. Or do you have a rough plan and then you end up going in surprising directions? Then the second question is, when I write academic essays, this is a very super-egoic process, I feel like I'm always trying to satisfy some inner peer reviewer or something. In writing novels, is there a kind of freedom that is less super ego driven or is there a different kind of super ego?

Anne Nesbet: It's so funny because, on the second thing, I remember always saying, well, the difference between writing fiction and writing academic stuff is when you write academic stuff, you know that everyone reading it is going to be hostile. They will all be reading it and then the closest to positive you're going to get are people who are just hoping you don't say the thing they wanted to say in their essay so they don't have to cite you or whatever. That's a discouraging way to produce things. With fiction, you know that the people who pick up the book, the people who it's really intended for, hope they're going to like it. So they're reading it and they're hoping they're going to like it, that's actually huge.

Anne Nesbet: The irony is that once you get mixed up in actually publishing these books, you realize you're writing for the gatekeepers first and they are pretty much like the reviewer. They are going to be looking for all the reasons they could say "Not this one" or whatever. But if you get past them, it's like putting a message in a bottle, some people are going to get that message and it's going to be the one they needed to get. Now, the thing about writing for kids in the middle grade range is that you almost never meet the real readers. You're an amazing exception in my life because mostly the middle grade students are not the ones who are writing back or sending emails or whatever.

Anne Nesbet: When they got it and they liked it and it was a message in the bottle for them, you'll never know. But from the ones that every now and then pop up, that's enough to make it a completely different experience than just the academic writing, even though there's all those layers of the super ego stuff still going on. But then the other thing you said was also really interesting?

Speaker 4: Plotting the book.

Anne Nesbet: Oh, plotting. The other thing is I have a day job. I teach full time, it's busy. That means that if I have a little bit of time for writing, I kind of have to know what I'm doing. So who knows what the cause and effect are here, but I plot like crazy beforehand and in fact I always carry around with me notebooks for the things that I'm working on at the time. These are different, this is the one I'm kind of drafting right now, this is the one I'm revising right now.

Anne Nesbet: I just always have this and if I have a plot thought, then I go in here and then I put it on that. That doesn't mean that the other thing you said is exactly right too, because you do all that plotting and then of course once you're writing it's like you never thought of this... you're just stumped all the time. So it has to be a combination of planning ahead of time because you don't have very much time to work in, and then just seeing what happens.

Kristen Whissel: Thank you.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley Book Chat and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in this series.