

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories Workshop

Laurent Linn – Embrace who you are.



Laurent:

Maybe that tree has something to do with her story too.

David:

I think you just found it, yeah.

David:

Hi there. This is David and welcome to The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories Workshop. We are so glad you've come to visit this podcast where we delve into the process of creating a Sparkle Story. What you're going to hear is a conversation between me, our chief storyteller here at Sparkle, and a special guest. Our guests are people from all walks. Some you may know, and others you might not, but all are conscious of the stories we tell our children and their impact. I ask all of our guests, "What do you think children need to hear right now?" We have a conversation that will ultimately lead to a produced audio story for children. We'll share a bit of that story here after the conversation.

Today, I will collaborate with Laurent Linn. Laurent is currently an Art Director at Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, where he collaborates on picture books, middle grade books, and teen novels. He is also the author/illustrator of the critically acclaimed young adult novel, *Draw the Line*, and has illustrated numerous picture books. Laurent is on the Board of Advisors of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and is the Artistic Advisor for the annual Original Art exhibit at the Society of Illustrators in New York. I've actually known Laurent a long time... well before he began his career as a puppet designer and builder in Jim Henson's Muppet Workshop, creating characters for productions including the Muppet Christmas Carol and Muppet Treasure Island films, and eventually becoming the Creative Director for the Sesame Street Muppets, oh ... and winning an Emmy Award.

Thank you Laurent - and all of you listening - for joining us - and we hope you enjoy the conversation and the process. And be sure to listen for a special message from Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories at the very end. Now here is our conversation.

David:

Welcome Laurent Linn to our podcast, it is so nice to see you.

Laurent:

It is very wonderful to be here, extremely wonderful to be here.

David:

Are you in New York?

Laurent:

I am, I'm in Manhattan, New York City.

David:

You're in Manhattan, okay. Lauren Linn, as I see it, is in the magic and wonder business. And so far as I can tell, always has been. Can we go straight to your book? Can you tell me a little bit about it?

Laurent:

Sure. I'm an illustrator and an author myself also. And so I've illustrated quite a few picture books, many with Muppets in them in the past. But my novel, interestingly enough, I've always focused on young childhood, everything I've done with Sesame Street, the Muppets and with children's books that I'm involved with now. But when I'm writing the past years, I really focused on teens. And so it's a young adult novel, it's called Draw The Line, and it's also illustrated. The main character is an artist, and so it's his illustrations, which of course I did, channeling a 16 year old in the ways I could. It's always, not approaching write what you know, it's right what you want to know.

And my novel, Draw The line explores how to fight brutality with art instead of becoming the monster to defeat the monster and how can art fight brutality? How can art... And in his case, literal art, he draws comics and superheroes and help spread the truth and fight the bullies. And I wanted to know how to do that. And so I wrote the book and I know how this character did it.

David:

In this character, did it specifically through the arts? And can you give an example of a way in which that from a proactive place, rather than a defensive place?

Laurent:

In the book, it's something that he does innately, which is he illustrates, he draws and tell stories of what he sees in the world. So it is a reaction, but it's really fine. This how you see the world, it's one of these things that I... Because I'm also involved with an organization called The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and I'm on the Board of Advisors and I do a lot of conferences. And I talk a lot about what may seem mundane to you about yourself, or what is every day to you is magical and brand new to everyone else. And so it's that kind of a thing with how you see the world to you is just how you see it, so it's kind of every day. But to others, it may be eye-opening and enlightening because art has power. Stories have power, visual arts have power, dance music have power that is unlike anything else. And if you're showing the truth of what you see, then that's a powerful, I don't want to say weapon, I don't like that word, but it's a powerful tool of...

David:

Transformation. You're speaking alchemically almost, but you're actually altering reality. And this is something that, in these last few years especially, in working with children on their storytelling, rather than just telling them stories, seeing them wake up to this idea that your main character or you have woken up to which is actually I have something far more powerful than a weapon, I can actually change reality. Which is very exciting.

Laurent:

Yes.

David:

I'm struck with how, with the Muppets and with Sesame Street and a number of other things that you've been involved in, you mentioned that you were focused on young children. And then at least recently when it became time for you to manifest these last projects, and especially this book, you found yourself more interested in teenagers. And I have had a similar experience and I attribute it to the fact that I had teenagers, but I'm almost wondering if there's a growing up with our audience that takes place. Did you have something like that?

Laurent:

I don't know about that. I think it's growing up with myself. But also at Simon and Schuster as an art director, I work on picture books, middle grade and young adult novels, art directing, and then designing the books themselves. My specialty, my passion are picture books. So I'm still in that very young age range with telling stories but someone else's the author, someone else's the illustrator. I think for me, the things I had to say for myself, I want to kind of present a roadmap in a way that I didn't have for teens now because I think something within me, I think did want to graduate preschool from Sesame street, and move up into saying something a bit more complex, or a lot more complex.

David:

And you mentioned superheroes, and I find myself really connecting in with that just because I've written within that genre as well and have found it actually to be a robust and versatile way of telling a story. But I'm curious what your attraction was to at least incorporate in terms of the images that were being used. So talk to me about your relationship with superheroes.

Laurent:

The way I define it, the way I've thought about it is, it comes down to Batman and Superman in a way. And to me, I find Superman much more intriguing than Batman. Superman is born this way, he's born with these things he can do that he has to cover up, he has to hide, he has to try to blend in and be other people, be like someone else, has to lie about his identity. It's all about identity. That man really is a rich white millionaire, billionaire, whatever he is, he puts on a costume, he pretends, this might be part of his identity too but who he really is his everyday guys. And so it's this concept like the X-Men, you're born with a mutation, which is actually your superpower. So with the book I wrote, what I asked when I do school to visits, or did school visits in person to the high schools, and it's all about what is your superpower?

You think of super powers that can change the world as invisibility and flight, but it could be you're really good at making people laugh, you're a good friend, you cook well, there are certain ways you can change the world with your own superpower. And so that's my connection to superheroes and superpowers is letting who you are on the inside shine on the outside and finding out what is your special power.

David:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, it's that tension between almost like your power has this relationship to a shadow. It's almost like through the shadow you can find the super power. When I say that, does that resonate with you around this kind of intimate relationship between power and struggle? Your unique way of being challenged in the world?

Laurent:

Absolutely. I'm a gay man and growing up gay, as a queer person, you sometimes can blend in and I think are forced to blend in, especially in the past. So people have gone to great lengths to hide who they are, and yet that's their superpower because that's who they are, that's our identity. So it definitely, you have it right on that there's a struggle with that. And because with power comes power and how do you use in the way that doesn't hurt anyone, but helps people.

David:

Mm-hmm. Yeah, that was always a real distinction over and over again was service, service, service, and having to remind myself of that. As the writer, you have a position of power. You've call all the shots and so you can take that in any direction. Okay. Let's go to Texas. Can you talk to me about your early... Did you grow up in Texas?

Laurent:

Yes. I'm from Dallas and I'm third generation Texan on both sides.

David:

Wow. There's a golden thread in your professional life. I can see the connections between the different incarnations in the professional world. What about growing up? What about especially early childhood? When did you get some clues looking back of where you were headed?

Laurent:

My mother was a professional puppeteer and in the 1950s, in the Dallas Fort worth area, she had a TV show with puppets. And it was early TV, live TV, and so she had this passion for it. And I have an older brother and she thought, "Great, I have a child now, I will get him interested in puppetry," because she had been turned to early childhood education and that was her whole career until she retired. And so she tried to get my brother interested in puppets and he just wasn't. So she said, Oh, it's my thing. I'm putting on my kids. And she tells me that one, I forgot how old, but it was a very tiny, tiny, tiny. She came in the living room and I was doing a puppet show behind the couch with rocks that I had gotten from outside. She's like, "Here's the one." So I was always encouraged, always encouraged for puppetry, for drawing for being, being myself. I'm very, very fortunate that way. I know a lot of other people don't have that.

David:

Yeah, that's a pretty magical environment for a creative to grow up in. And I'm reminded actually of my younger son who would entertain himself for hours with whatever was around and he would turn them into puppets. And they were often bottle caps, I'm not sure why there were so many bottle caps around, but actually, I think he had a collection and he would...

Laurent:

Like Bert. Bert and Ernie. Bert has a bottle cap collection.

David:

Oh, you're right, right.

Laurent:

Anyways, sorry, continue. It just made me think of Bert.

David:

Always interrupt with muppets.

Laurent:

There's got to be a muppet.

David:

Yeah. Well, can we visit the Muppets for a little bit?

Laurent:

Of course, always.

David:

Because for our generation, it is central, it was the day of the week, was the day that you would watch the Muppets. Can you talk about your relationship with the Muppets growing up and then actually becoming a part of the Muppets?

Laurent:

Certainly, whether it's in the genes or wherever it comes from, puppetry has always fascinated me, just always fascinated me. And I thought about it much over the years. Well, when I worked there, I was of the first generation, me and my colleagues are our age to be raised on Sesame Street and raised with the Muppets and then work on it, work for the company for Jim Henson. Because I was born in 1967, Sesame Street started 1969 and The Muppet Show of course '70s, and we were the perfect age for The Muppet Show, then of course everyone was, I suppose.

So I thought about it a lot and asked them because I am fascinated by this. And to me, I think it's because it brings everything I love together. It's character, it's storytelling, sculpting. I sculpt, I sew, I craft things. It's the one way that you can truly invent a world and it's a world that can be connected to our world, like with Muppets, where you have people, actual human beings can be outside, but these characters exist in our world and that handcrafted quality to it that has that live aspect to it. If there's imperfections and that I think is important too. And I think that's why I love it so much, and I've always been connected.

David:

Yeah. I'm really taken with this notion of imperfections. And it's interesting, there's kind of a little bit of a callback to the whole superhero thing with our imperfections being this clue into our super powers.

Laurent:

How can I be my true self, but it's also, how do I find my justice league, because that's one thing with superheroes that fascinates me too, is that when they come together... It's all about community. When you go to college, sometimes that's when you find community. I know I did. And or when it's like, when I worked at the Muppets, boy did I find my league of superheroes there, people who geeked out about the same things I geeked out about, that type of thing. And especially for kids that those years where you might be raised in a place that you don't have your community, you might be at a school where you don't have your community, how do you stick with it? How do you know you'll find the community? And so you're transforming yourself, but you transform others. How can I use my superpower for good of who I am and help others while I'm helping myself?

David:

And this idea of community too, that extra layer to it of where else... Well, I guess, ideally in all communities, you want it to be this way, where you are your most powerful self, you show up in your most powerful way, and we are a community that is not only going to support that, but figure out how we work together. We want to help the greater population. We want to point towards the greater good. How can this group with all of our personalities... I mean, Aquaman, holy moly, and then be able to actually leverage all those things together so that we can intuitively... It's exhilarating the idea of being a part of a group like that.

Laurent:

It is. And speaking of the superhero aspect, the one flaw with that is with typical superheroes, it's all about violence. That's why I wrote my book. It's like, how do you use these superpowers, how can we peacefully solve things when the enemy, whoever that is, is using violence? How do we fight violence without violence?

David:

I'd love to ask you at this point, Laurent, with working with the young ones, and now really immersing yourself in the older ones, let's go back to those, four, five, six, seven year old kids right now that are reading your books and are reading the books that you've worked on and help manifest into the world, what do you think those children need to hear right now?

Laurent:

So much. But I think one of the main things, especially now, is along the theme we're talking about is what other people think of you is none of your business. And it's more than that it doesn't matter, it's none of your business.

David:

But you you're actually turning it completely around and giving agency to the child of, you know what, that's actually none of your business what they like or don't like. Instead of it being the message that kids so often get, and we grown-ups get is, you shouldn't worry about what other people think, which is really hard to do. But you give a child, or now me I want to do this, the actual feeling that you're crossing a line, it's none of your business, that's theirs. They get to like or not like whatever they want, has nothing to do with you.

Laurent:

Right. Exactly.

David:

Yeah that's amazing and transformative. I love this idea of you and I now spinning a story together where we can not only deliver that message but perhaps even give a practice or a skill. Embed that in the narrative if we can see if we can pull that off. Game?

Laurent:

Yeah. Very much so, yes.

David:

Okay, great. So I feel like maybe we might want to find a character first. And if we could, I would love to steer this a little bit more towards our younger ones, because this experience of liking and not liking is creeping into earlier and earlier ages. So maybe we can help nip that in the bud a bit and focus in on, I don't know, what age do you think?

Laurent:

Well, what we call the picture book age range, which is kind of that four to six, four to seven year old.

David:

Beautiful.

Laurent:

Because that's when it's more of a you have a sense of self-discovery and suddenly you're starting to compare yourself to others.

David:

Yeah, yeah. Great. Okay, so let's pick a kind of story. We've been talking a lot about superhero stories and we can certainly go there, but I wonder if there is a animals, fairytales, old world professions, modern stories, magical stories. Is there something that you find yourself attracted to right now?

Laurent:

So an animal that might be concerned with how they look and how they are seen by others, so some something that...

David:

Well, let me trip you up just a little bit.

Laurent:

Sure.

David:

So let's go to the zoo, all right?

Laurent:

Let's go, I love it.

David:

Let's go. You and I, let's go to the zoo. And we're going in through the front gate and there's a map and you and I are walking over to the map and we don't have that much time actually. So we agree that we're going to kind of stick with one exhibit initially. So let's look over the map and see all the different icons that are there. And so in your imagination, are you finding yourself attracted to a particular area in the zoo?

Laurent:

Oh, let's go ahead and see the monkeys.

David:

I was thinking the same thing. I definitely want to go to the monkeys, yeah.

Laurent:

What are those monkeys that...

David:

Bonobo?

Laurent:

They're black and white, shaggy black and white. Maybe bonobo, I don't know.

David:

That's the picture I had.

Laurent:

Okay, let's just say that.

David:

They're kind of they're ape sized almost, right? They're kind of big.

Laurent:

Sure, why not?

David:

Sure. All right.

Laurent:

That sounds good. They have really beautiful fur, longish fur.

David:

Nice. Okay. All right. I think I'm adapting and I'm finding your monkey.

Laurent:

I wish I knew more about different species.

David:

I think we can just go with monkey for now.

Laurent:

A monkey.

David:

Great. All right, and is this a story about one of the monkeys? Is this a story about a child looking at the monkeys?

Laurent:

I'm seeing it as one of the monkeys...

David:

Great, okay let's stick to the monkeys then.

Laurent:

Because they have that community.

David:

Okay. All right. Can you pick one and do we want to ascribe a pronoun for this monkey? Where should we go?

Laurent:

I think she's she, and I think she's small.

David:

Like comparatively small.

Laurent:

Comparatively small.

David:

Okay, nice. Yeah. All right, so it sounds like we may have found a dynamic that exists for her and let's see if we can hone in on an early memory for her, an event that took place. Are we at the zoo or are we in the natural world? Are we in Indonesia?

Laurent:

Go to the natural world because zoos are so loaded with so much.

David:

I think it's a great idea.

Laurent:

And it's also more expansive...

David:

More opportunity.

Laurent:

Although zoo is interesting because you are on display.

David:

Yeah. But let's see you doubling back. No, forget it.

Laurent:

Let's not be in the zoo. Let's not be in the zoo.

David:

All right. But we could be in a place where there is some looking going on. There may be room for that. But we're in this monkey community. And I don't know if you're there, but I'm kind of on an island sort of a tropically kind of island. Where are you?

Laurent:

Oh, I'd love to be on one now so yes,

David:

Okay. Let's go be on an Island.

Laurent:

That also does contain the world, it makes it a smaller world too.

David:

Okay. All right. It may actually be a small island now that I'm thinking about it, this is small thing keeps coming up. So we have a name you want to go with? With this young?

Laurent:

Not yet.

David:

Okay. All right. Great. So this young, small monkey on a small island has an event that takes place early on. And then let's see if we can hone in on this event. And then, well, let's just do that and see what we learn.

Laurent:

I don't know why Nella came to mind as a name.

David:

Okay. Nella. I like it.

Laurent:

Nella. An early event that would have formed her....

David:

A relationship perhaps? A family member or a friend?

Laurent:

Well, she's one of seven siblings, why not? And she's the smallest of all and yet she's the oldest...

David:

Ah there it is.

Laurent:

... of her siblings.

David:

Right, and everyone should be bigger.

Laurent:

And so when her siblings started to grow bigger than she did, she early on felt something was not right with her and it was always commented on.

David:

Right. So let's expand our view on this island and maybe make room for other species. This is probably a place where species can talk to each other and have to learn things from each other. And so, as you're looking around, in this island paradise, maybe, I don't know, we haven't established it's paradise, but it's sounds maybe better than New York at the moment.

Laurent:

Well, anywhere but the room we've been in for the past year.

David:

Yeah. Right. An island. So scanning around, are you noticing anything in particular? Is it a bird? Is it another mammal? Is it a reptile? Is it a person?

Laurent:

There are a lot of birds. I'm picturing a lot of birds, especially because birds come in all shapes and sizes and colors. And unlike monkeys on this Island, the birds come in every kind of shape, size and color that you can imagine.

David:

Right. And this wealth of variety, the idea of comparing would be ridiculous.

Laurent:

Right. And she envies them because she feels one's comparing them to other birds because each one looks so different and their songs sound different too.

David:

Well, she can climb too. So she shares the trees, these objective beings of this particular land that are the architecture about which all the different, the community exists. And climbing up and up and up to get a better look and be with these birds that she finds herself feeling differently doesn't she? When she's with the birds, but maybe too young to really understand why. Are you inclined towards there being a voice of the mentor of reframing things for her?

Laurent:

Yeah, because that is so important. And there's an asset balance of mentor versus agency of character discovering for themselves.

David:

Practicing it, yeah.

Laurent:

So that balance of, let me show you another way versus I find them other way myself. I'm not...

David:

Well, I think you just answered it right there, which is instead of it being a mentor, it would be the opportunity to change perspective.

Laurent:

Well, something popped in my head of she sees a bird, this bird is crying and extremely sad and she doesn't understand how this bird could be sad. So she creeps closer on the branch and just sits there with the bird because she's inclined to help this bird and try to find out what's going on.

David:

Mm-hmm. That act of service really brings her closer, I want to focus on someone else, yeah.

Laurent:

And to herself, how can someone so beautiful, so exquisite be sad?

David:

Right, doesn't make any sense.

Laurent:

So one question my mind is jumping ahead to this bird within its community is seen as ugly. It's called ugly, even though this bird is the most magnificent bird that Nella has seen.

David:

I think actually what we've done is, I love it, because it has given these two individuals now an opportunity to see a dynamic that's happening with someone else. Just like Nella, for the time being, kind of steps out of her own misery to focus on someone else, this bird may do the same. And communally between focusing on the other, they may discover things that they wouldn't see about themselves, a mirror experience where this monkey and this extraordinary bird go into some sort of mirroring conversation where a new perspective, a transformation takes place when they realize, "Oh, wow, that's none of our business. It none of our business."

Laurent:

And getting to that understanding does come with thinking about the why others view you in a certain way? And of course it's about them, not you. And that's none of my business because it has nothing to do with me.

David:

Yeah. I love the trajectory that the two of them discover this through community, through making themselves vulnerable, by being interested in someone else and then taking the time to pay attention to them in order to discover something that they needed to discover themselves. The old use body you got it.

Laurent:

Maybe that tree has something to do with her story too.

David:

I think you just found it, yeah. I think that the environment of the story being the real armature for the narrative right there, the one that's really going to lock it in. All right. We'll find it. Laurent, this has been a joy and deeply nourishing for me.

Laurent:

Me too.

David:

I wonder if there's, yeah. We've touched on a few of the things that you're up to. Is there anything that you'd like our listeners to know about you or places that you would like to send them?

Laurent:

Well, I'm sure of you listening out there are writers wanting to write stories yourself or are writing stories yourself. Speaking of community, the organization I mentioned before, Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, is a wonderful community for writers and illustrators as evidenced by the title and the name of it. It's the only real organization for anyone who wants to create stories for children for books, from being published in books. And I don't mean this to be a commercial for it, it's just a resource that I like to... Because people often say I have a story and I want to write a book. I want to share it. Where do I go? And that is the place to go because publishing is a very tricky business on the business side of it, but it's also such a wonderful community.

David:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. I've never been and so I need to do that myself and I'll find you there.

Laurent:

Yes. It's scbwi.org is the website Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, scbwi.org.

David:

Great talking with you and spinning a story with you.

Laurent:

This has been fun.

David:

Yeah, I really enjoyed it. It's nice to be able to lock in on that incredible mind of yours so what a joy. Thank you Laurent, thank you for joining us.

Laurent:

My pleasure.

David:

Hello again. This is a snippet of the story that Laurent and I found in our conversation. Now, as you may hear, the tree did become much more important and actually ended up being the character that held the therapeutic lesson of the narrative, showing this untroubled nature of a tree, as well as the ability to see someone objectively and deeply empathize with them. So the title is Sleeping on an Untroubled Tree. Here's the snippet.

Sleeping on an Untroubled tree. In the center of a small tropical island in the Indian ocean, there was once an untroubled tree. The tall, but not overly tall, full, but not abundantly full strong, but certainly not the strongest tree, stood amidst many trees of its kind. On this particular island, the tree was called a Sesendok. But it would have been called a Famo tree in mainland Thailand, Gubas in the Philippines or a Turbulan in nearby Malaysia.

There were several taller Sesendok trees on this island, many had a wider canopy. All around the tree where those thicker of trunk and most had a more dense collection of leaves. But this tree was not interested in making such comparisons. This tree was not bothered by how other trees looked. No, this tree, like all Sesendok trees of the small island was an untroubled tree. The tree took its size and its shape and its fullness as its own.

Now in the branches of this untroubled tree was a large family of monkeys, a dozen monkeys, light brown and black Siberut macaque monkeys had designated the untroubled tree as a sleeping tree. They ate figs from fig trees, palm fruit from palm trees, and leaves from a variety of trees. But this Sesendok was their sleeping tree and therefore was a very special tree to them all. One of the younger monkeys was named Nella. And recently, Nella had a challenging time getting to sleep. Most nights, she shifted on her branch and looked around at the other monkeys in their untroubled sleeping tree. She sometimes looked down at her younger brother who was often fast asleep and surely dreaming of palm fruit.

She regularly measured the length of his arm with her eyes, again, seeing that his arm was clearly longer than her arm. She sometimes watched her younger sister shift on her branch and see that little Famo's tail was significantly longer than hers. She knew that all of her siblings, the three older, as well as the two younger had longer arms and legs and tails than she did. Her father and mother also had longer arms and legs and tails than she did. This was why she couldn't get comfortable and why she couldn't sleep.

Lisabeth:

Hi, this is Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories. What you just heard was a snippet of the full collaborative story. David and Laurent created together. To hear the entire story, as well as over 1300 other original stories, visit us at sparklestories.com. The stories from the podcast are all free to listen to, you'll find them on the browse page. And while you're there consider subscribing, you can start an extended free trial when you use the code `storying, S-T-O-R-Y-I-N-G`. That way you can enjoy all of the stories in our library as often as you like. In particular, you might enjoy the story. Rocky the Donkey, from the Sparkle Sleepy Time Collection.

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories Workshop was produced by Marjorie Shik. The audio editor is Nate Gwatney. Theme music composed by Angus Sewell McCann. If you'd like to know more about Laurent and all of the wonderful projects he works on, you can find him laurentlinn.com and be sure to head over to our website for many useful links related to this episode. We are so grateful to Laurent for joining us and sharing his kindness. I particularly love the idea that it's not your business what other people think of you? How liberating is that? We hope you enjoyed it. If you enjoyed this podcast, please consider following us and then leave us a review and let us know what you think. Thanks for listening.

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