

The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories Workshop

Rhea Pechter – It's okay to be unsure.



Rhea:

I mean, I would imagine conversations that I would have. I had a whole like inner world going on, which I think you kind of have to have if you are going to write dialogue later in life.

David:

Hello there, this is David, and welcome to The Storying Project, a Sparkle Stories workshop. We're so glad you've come to visit this podcast where we delve into the process of creating an original Sparkle Story. So 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?, and then we have a conversation that will ultimately lead to a produced audio story for children, and we'll share a little bit of that story here after our conversation.

Today, I will collaborate with Rhea Pechter. We are so excited to have Rhea, the magical mind and voice behind the kids' podcast, Little Stories for Tiny People. Little Stories for Tiny People consistently ranks as a top kids and family podcast, and has been recommended by School Library Journal, and Mashable, and Time Out New York, and Common Sense Media, and Parents.com. And Rhea is also a mom and the published author of the picture book, Little Fox Can't Wait to Dream. Thank you so much Rhea, and all of you listening for joining us, and we hope you enjoy this conversation. And be sure to listen for a message from Lisabeth of Sparkle Stories at the very end. Now here's our conversation.

David:

Hi, Rhea.

Rhea:

Hello.

David:

I was listening to a podcast interview of you. This was one that was focused more on the business of what you do, turning your passion and your talent and what you do into making a living. And there's one thing that you said that really just grabbed me, and I would love to start here. And you just tossed this out there, and you said this, and it just grabbed me, and one of the things was like, where am I? Am I real? And boy, did I relate to that. From a different standpoint and a different relationship but boy did I relate to that experience of creativity and the need to create. So I just wanted to make some room right off the bat to hear more about your relationship to creativity and making things.

Rhea:

I mean, I've come to think of humans as makers and as storytellers. I think of myself that way too. I think there's something really deeply rooted in being human that has to do with making things, and by making things we have evidence that we are real. And I think when you are in a kind of a low period for yourself, at least in my own life when I've been in kind of a difficult time, and I would count having young

children, a toddler and a baby at the same time, as being one of those challenging times, there can start to feel like there's this detachment that's happening.

Rhea:

I typically think of it as feeling like I'm at sea, that I feel untethered. And when I start to feel untethered and ungrounded, that is now a signal to me. This is part of growing older and learning how do I keep myself level in my own life. So now I understand, okay, when I'm feeling at sea, when I'm getting that at sea feeling, that's when I have to ground myself, and it happens to be that that means I better go make something. I better create something that's tangible in some way. And I think even though audio you can't touch it, it feels like a tangible thing that I've made. It can't be undone.

Rhea:

And I also really reminded myself of who I was. I think it's very easy for, particularly mothers, to start to feel like, where did my personality go? It's very draining to deal with little kids. And a lot of times also, it doesn't always bring out the best aspects of your personality. So there has to be some way to get back to the things that you do love about yourself. And I think when I got real with myself, that reminded me of, okay, well, what did I do as a child? Because I think when you are a child you just do what you want to do. You do what feels good generally.

Rhea:

Children are not bound by a lot of the expectations that adults place on themselves or they feel pressures from the outside world, especially young children before the peer influence becomes all consuming. So I think it can be worth, when you are in a low time, thinking back, well, what was it that made me feel the most alive as a kid. And so that was always drawing. I had a pretty vivid imagination. I would draw cartoons. That was like my happy place. Now I've learned there's no reason to abandon that as an adult. That's a place I can go. And the beautiful thing has been other people can enjoy what I make.

David:

Yes, and a lot of people. And there's a couple of things that I'd love to follow up on. Storytelling is such an interesting choice for making. So I would love to hear you talk a little bit more about the craft of storytelling. You started to talk about it when you were also younger with your relationship to imagination, but I'd love to hear your thoughts on the craft of storytelling.

Rhea:

I do sometimes go to making something with my hands, and that can actually lead to a story. I don't understand the connection but I do think creativity begets creativity. I've had the experience where I will be in a lull, I can't think of ideas for any stories, and I try not to force it because the stuff that just bubbles up is always better. But I remember I was kind of in a down period, I couldn't come up with anything, and one of the things that got me out of it was painting. Just the act of going through the process, something kick-started in my brain and gave me more ideas. But it also helped me visualize the craft of storytelling, because when you paint, typically you're building a painting. You're doing it in layers. And so first layer is that really broad brush, you're just getting kind of the placement of everything. Then you go back over a few layers, you're getting more details. It's not until the very end that you're adding those little flourishes.

Rhea:

And it can be the same with a story. I don't know what you think about that but I sometimes imagine, okay, the first pass, I'm just trying to get, what are the broad outlines of the story. And then I do a few more passes, and I try to add detail, and I really work out what I'm trying to say. And then at the very end I'm trying to add in little funny details here and there.

David:

You've already given me a bunch of images, and one of them is this, where to go for renewal, where to go for nourishment, where to go for solace, where to go to feel safe and cared for. That image comes up. And I wonder if there were particular stories or activities, creative acts that you did when you were a kid or just coming into your imagination that were where you would go for that.

Rhea:

Yeah. I mean, I always went to my drawing pad. I filled up drawing pads. I, thankfully, still have some of them. I think that's where I went when I needed to recharge. Art was always a really important expression for me. I loved to read too. I loved books. I remember Frog and Toad was one of my favorite series as a kid. I loved the humor. I was always just a really artistic kid, a book worm. And I still am.

Rhea:

I was always okay being by myself. I mean, I would imagine conversations that I would have. I had a whole like inner world going on, which I think you kind of have to have if you are going to write dialogue later in life in a story. You have to really be able to imagine all of that. I just always had it, and I honestly thought I was kind of a weirdo for that. It wasn't something I was advertising but I think I also knew on some level that that was important and it was something...

Rhea:

I think what it is was it was helping me process things. That was how I processed things, was I replayed things a lot in my mind over and over, I imagined how I would respond to different situations. I think there's something about that that's helped me process. And a lot of my stories, it's also just me processing something that's been on my mind a lot through a story. It just comes out that way. So it's not really like I'm trying to be moralistic or anything, it's really just, I have this really big idea that keeps swirling in my brain and just by putting it into the form of a story, it helps me sort out my thoughts about it.

David:

I love this image of... It's almost like the creative process you were describing earlier with going over and over trying out different dialogues and different scenarios in your imagination, this young girl. And I'm loving hearing your relationship to painting because you did the images in your book, right, *The Little Fox Can't Wait to Dream*?

Rhea:

Yeah.

David:

How did you make those pictures?

Rhea:

Those are all digital illustrations.

David:

What was that like?

Rhea:

Oh my gosh. It was hard. I didn't think that I could illustrate a book. And it's not the same as just drawing a picture, it's much different. I really pushed myself on that. It took about a year, I guess, in fits and starts. And I had never done a digital illustration, so that was new too. I had also never done that kind of

artwork that had to have the same look and feel to every illustration. I mean, I somehow did it. I just kept going.

David:

Is that how you were able to do it, by keeping going?

Rhea:

Yes.

David:

No pun intended, but did you need to draw on some experience in the past relationship to storytelling or other artwork in order to push through? Because I don't like learning new media.

Rhea:

Yeah, it's intimidating. I think I drew on my experience with the podcast. I saw how, okay, I didn't know anything about audio when I started the podcast. It was super intimidating. I got some things wrong. My storytelling has progressed so much from just continuing just one foot in front of the other, and I just realized, well, I can apply that here too. And over time, doing the podcast has shown me how I had some mental blocks that that's all they were, they were mental. So it's all about just removing those and seeing how far I can get, which is hard. You build them up as you become an adult for various reasons to protect yourself, and then you kind of have to chip away at them when you want to do something new.

David:

So true.

Rhea:

But it's also watching my kids. Gosh, kids are always doing new things. That is their entire life, and they tackle them. My oldest has no... There's nothing he can't do in his mind. He's just incredibly confident. I was not like that as a kid. So I've learned a lot simply by watching. This is just how he is. No one made him this way. He is like, "If I want to do something, it's just a matter of doing it. I'll just keep trying until I do it." So I've looked at that and it just makes me... He's taught me a lot.

David:

Was there any influence there from your oldest with at least the title? I want to hear more about Little Fox, but this juxtaposition of can't wait to dream, this like urgency, full of energy, can't wait to, you expect, climb a mountain, or jump into that hole, or catch my first fish or something, but it's can't wait to dream. And in the to dream I recognize Rhea. Tell me a little bit about Little Fox.

Rhea:

Well, I did get the idea for Little Fox from my son when he was three. It was really just, at first, a ploy to get him to go to bed. I've always thought dreams are... I've never heard an all encompassing explanation for why exactly we dream, why dreams are so wild, and what exactly they mean. I think they are just this mysterious experience that we all have. So I've always thought it's pretty cool that we can dream. I wanted to share that with my son because I think so often little kids, they just don't want to go to bed. They are not seeing the fact that sleep is when your brain grows, your brain makes new connections. You have these dreams, they must... Your brain is so active when you're just resting. So I talked to him about that and he... I don't know. He was convinced by it.

Rhea:

I like the idea. Many of my characters, the excitement in their lives is not from external events really, it's from how they are interpreting the events, how they are imagining what could happen. So Little Fox is one of those characters, and I have another character, Little Hedgehog who is really popular. Little

Hedgehog, what happens in her day-to-day is usually not that remarkable. She expects miraculous things to happen because she imagines them, but that's all from her own imagination. I love that idea of, whatever's going on, it could be pretty unexciting happenings, but it's how can I find something interesting about this situation even if it's completely dull. So I think Little Fox, Little Hedgehog, these are all kind of extensions of that idea.

David:

Well, what do you think? Those children or children in general that would be listening to your stories, what do they need to hear right now?

Rhea:

I've been thinking about this a lot, I think, especially when COVID hit, it made me think about what am I conveying through the stories. I have the opportunity to talk to thousands of kids during this strange time. What kept coming to me was exploring the uncertainty of life. I think that so many stories are wrapped up with a bow, and it does give children a feeling of comfort and security, but I also think there are times when we have to acknowledge that life is inherently uncertain and unpredictable, and that I think children need to see examples of just being able to sit in that and cope with it somehow. I think a lot of children in particular felt like they are suddenly in this fog and you can't see the way out. You don't know what's coming. And I think particularly for kids whose sense of time is so different than ours, it's very unsettling. That is something I've tried to address with my own kids.

David:

How did you do that? What do you say to them in these times of uncertainty and unsettled with relationship to the future? What do you say to your kids?

Rhea:

Well, I have tried to normalize uncertainty and let them know that it's... I think my kids probably did feel like they had very stable lives before this. And I think they've been able to maintain stability from a wider perspective. To them, this has felt really destabilizing but I've tried to remind them life is unpredictable, and the important thing is we are together, we can get through this. And I've tried to have uncertainty go hand-in-hand with finding joy in very small things, in everyday things. Because a lot of kids, their lives were... The scope was suddenly reduced. How do you just go through the daily things and still find contentment? It's about taking a walk and just taking in nature.

Rhea:

I think for me in times of uncertainty, gosh, I mean, nothing grounds me more than thinking, okay, we are just on this spinning rock. It's just kind of getting to basics. And I think for kids, they need to learn that too. I've told my kids directly that they are learning an important lesson early, that we don't know that... Stability we feel is in large part illusory. And so this has been a lesson that they are just learning maybe a little bit on the early side. Certainly many kids throughout the world don't have stable lives at all, and I've thought about that a lot over the past year thinking, how do they get through and what do they focus on? There is certainly people who don't have the security that my own family has typically had.

David:

Now so many of us are getting a taste of that truth. I mean, it's just a truth. It's just a truth of how things are, is that there is nothing certain except change. So we've all had this taste of a year of complete uncertainty every day from every different angle, and yet I hear from you that you can find a measure of rhythm and stability when you get small, Little Stories For Tiny People. When you get small, into a walk in the same woods that you did three years ago, you can notice that the same Crocuses are popping up in the same area. And suddenly that sort of expectation can return when we get small, when we get small. And I'm picturing you once again, just this little one retreating into your imagination as that form of stability. Those little things, those ordinary things are what save us in times of uncertainty.

Rhea:

Right.

David:

And ironically, sometimes children will experience them with boredom. Will be just, this again, and yet it is our salvation to have a regular relationship to those. So if you and I were going to create... Well, you and I are going to create a story. I do find myself really attracted to those characters like Little Fox and Little Hedgehog and their completely embodied relationship to, what some might call, the ordinary, because of course it's never ordinary. In this world of uncertainty, there is no ordinary, there is just the things we do. With Sparkle Stories, we have a series of stories that are all animals at a junkyard, and that provides the regular environment where uncertainty can come in and change and see how they all do that. Are you attracted towards an animal story?

Rhea:

Sure. Yeah.

David:

Is that something that makes sense to you? It seems like a lot of your stories do involve animals.

Rhea:

Almost all of them. Yes.

David:

And so when you think about our central character, whether it's an animal that's going to learn this lesson or an animal that's going to maybe demonstrate this lesson, is there one in particular that's coming to mind? Either one that you've worked with before or something that's occurring to you now?

Rhea:

I'm not sure. I'm thinking of a small animal.

David:

Okay. Is this small animal fuzzy?

Rhea:

I feel like it is fuzzy. Yeah.

David:

Yeah. I feel like it's fuzzy too. When you say small, how small are we going here?

Rhea:

Maybe like a mouse, or something similar, chipmunk, something like that.

David:

Mice can go in and out. Chipmunks tend to stay out. You want to stay outside or do you want to investigate a house?

Rhea:

I think outside is good.

David:

Then go with chipmunk?

Rhea:

Sure.

David:

Okay. All right. A little fuzzy chipmunk. Is this chipmunk a child chipmunk, or are you getting more of a mom, or dad, or older sibling sort of vibe from this chipmunk?

Rhea:

I would say a child.

David:

Okay. So we have a little chipmunk. This chipmunk, fair to say in a rock wall maybe, or underneath a tree, or edge of a yard, where are you picturing?

Rhea:

I'm thinking beneath a tree in kind of a wooded setting, I guess. Well, I've had this idea come to me before and I haven't explored it fully. It does have to do with uncertainty. That a fog could descend, and I've imagined how would a small creature cope with a fog that is now going on for many days and it's not lifting.

David:

What's the explanation that this chipmunk gets when the fog first arrives? Is this the first time that this little... Do we have a name for the chipmunk by the way?

Rhea:

Oh gosh. A name for the chipmunk.

David:

Just wondering if you had one that was right there.

Rhea:

I did not have one. Names are one of those things I often put a placeholder in my stories in the drafts.

David:

You know what I do? And it's why I have such ridiculous names in so many, is I just look at something and name it that.

Rhea:

Oh gosh. Okay. That's funny.

David:

And so whatever catches your attention in the room that you're in, there might be a name hidden in there. You got anything?

Rhea:

Maybe like Oakley.

David:

Oakley.

Rhea:

Oakley.

David:

That's a great name for a chipmunk. Little Oakley.

Rhea:

Oakley. I think Oakley is... This is the first fog that he's ever experienced. So the fog potentially has come in the past and-

David:

Other chipmunks know that.

Rhea:

... but he's never experienced the fog. And I think other characters, older characters, let's say, a squirrel, who's kind of an older squirrel...

David:

Goes up and down. They get a better view up there.

Rhea:

That's true. Yeah. Has seen the fog before.

David:

Yes. Has some context.

Rhea:

Yes, but cannot say when it will leave because there have been times when the fog has settled for a long time.

David:

Yeah. This is like a storyteller squirrel. "Gather round chipmunks, I have tales to tell you-

Rhea:

Oh yeah. I like that.

David:

... of the time of the fog and what happened and...

Rhea:

Yes. But I can see the fog bringing interesting experiences, like for Chipmunk Oakley, the fog might bring some unexpected protection from like foxes who might not be able to see him as clearly through the-

David:

Or even something from up above looking down-

Rhea:

Yes, the hawk-

David:

... not being able to-

Rhea:

... is going to have a much harder time. So I think there might be trade-offs that happen under the fog.

David:

So we've got Oakley who probably knows about hawks. That's probably an early lesson.

Rhea:

I'm imagining that comes from a rabbit who is extremely vulnerable. They are very aware of predators.

David:

Right.

Rhea:

So it could be that Oakley is really focused on the downsides of this fog, rolling in the fears about the future, how long is this going to last. And he comes to this rabbit who kind of says, "Yeah, yeah. I mean, that's true, but we are much better hidden now. I can actually leave my house more. I can hang out, eating, nibbling for a longer time."

David:

Right. And those two things can't see far away, like distance. Can't see into the future. Those are the things that, like the pandemic, made for us deeply uncertain. We can't see into the future. We can't see far away, so what do we do? We narrow our scope down to what's in front of us and what we do next. And so I wonder if there is some sort of rhythmic thing reminds little Oakley of the narrow and the short and the close and the tiny. And I wonder if that is a relationship to this other young rabbit. It feels kind of like a young one like Oakley, like they are schoolmates or something.

Rhea:

Right. I think it could represent how differently... Even creatures that they both haven't experienced the fog yet, this is their first time, but they can have very different interpretations of it from the get-go. So the rabbit is kind of thinking, "Oh, I'm safe now." I think that it could be as simple as they realize that they can stay out in the open watching some tiny creatures do some work that's really interesting to watch.

David:

Maybe they do on a regular basis. It's a part of their normal everyday life.

Rhea:

Yeah. I like that.

David:

I like it too. I like this story. I want to hear this story.

Rhea:

Me too.

David:

It's soothing me at this really pivotal time. There's a lot of feeling of possibility out there of we might be at the tail end of this. And yet we've been schooled on... What is it? Count your chickens?

Rhea:

That's right. Are we at the edge of the fog? Where are we? We don't know.

David:

Right. Is that fog about to go now, about to go off?

Rhea:

Right. Is it lifting?

David:

This has been a very pleasant experience crafting a story with a storyteller.

Rhea:

Same for me.

David:

Thank you for that. It was really joyful. Rhea, I want to send people of course over to your website, but you may want to send them other places where they can experience the podcast and learn more about you, but is there anything else that you would like people listening to this episode to know about you or things that you are involved in?

Rhea:

Well, right now I am at work on my second book, which is really exciting.

David:

Oh, great.

Rhea:

Yeah. So anyone who does follow the podcast, I will be letting everyone know when that's done. I'm really excited to share that.

David:

Great.

Rhea:

I mean, you can find the podcast on any podcast app of your choosing. That and the website, that's the best place to find me.

David:

Littlestoriestinypeople.com.

Rhea:

Mm-hmm.

David:

Great. Okay. Head over to the website and get the book and start listening, and you'll always see Rhea's podcast at the top of the charts for kids and family. It's a very popular podcast. If you haven't heard it

yet you'll quickly see why, it's just delightful. And there's a number of other voices on there that... It's like your community is involved in the production.

Rhea:

Yes. Well, I have kids who send me so many things and I started incorporating their voices. Really it was their idea. I started getting kids just spontaneously sending me... Them saying my little intro message where I remind everyone that you need to use your imagination. I love when I hear from even like two-year-olds. It's really cute.

David:

No, they love you so, and it's really clear, and you really clearly enjoy incorporating them into the process so it brings a smile.

Rhea:

I do.

David:

As I am smiling now. Thank you. This has been a wonderful time. Thank you for being a part of this.

Rhea:

Oh, thank you for having me.

David:

Hey all, it's David again. Now this was a treat to work with another storyteller. I loved battling the story back and forth and finding something that really could be told by either of us, and then we decided that both of us should tell it. So Rhea ended up telling most of the story, and you're going to see why in a moment, and my part became that of Old Squirrel. So this was super fun and I hope you enjoy this little snippet.

Rhea:

Oakley and The Long Fog. Tucked in his cozy warm sweet smelling bed of dried leaves and flower petals, Oakley shifted this way and that trying to get comfortable. But the problem was not the softness of the bed, in fact, it was a perfect bed for a young chipmunk like himself. No, the problem was he could not stop thinking about something Old Squirrel had said earlier that day about the fog.

Rhea:

Old Squirrel was the storyteller of Oakley's corner of the forest. He had been in that corner longer than anyone and had seen so many remarkable things. Old Squirrel had seen a bird fly overhead that had all the colors of the rainbow. He had seen a clear sky suddenly fill with clouds that then dropped rain, and then ice, and then snow, all in one day. He had seen moose, and foxes, and even an old woman looking for mushrooms. Old Squirrel had stories for everything he had seen, and all the animals in that corner of the forest looked forward to hearing them. But this was different. The story old squirrel had told earlier that day was a little bit about things he had seen long ago, but mostly it was a story about something that the entire forest community was experiencing right in that moment. The fog.

Lisabeth:

Hi, this is Elisabeth of Sparkle Stories. What you just heard was a snippet of the full collaborative story that David and Rhea created together. To hear the entire story as well as over 1,300 other original stories, visit us at sparklestories.com. The stories from the podcast are all free to listen to and can be found on the browse page at sparklestories.com. And while you're there, consider subscribing. You can start with an extended free trial when you use the code, Storying, S-T-O-R-Y-I-N-G. In particular you

might enjoy the Sparkle Sleepytime collection as they are all gentle animal stories that end in the sense of calm and ease.

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 know more about Rhea and her podcast, be sure to head over to thestoryingproject.com for many useful links related to this episode. We are so grateful to Rhea for joining us and sharing her creativity and her vision. I was really taken with the idea of focusing on what's right in front of you, the small things right in front of you, when you get overwhelmed and afraid because that seems like a great way to get really present to what's real. 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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