

The BiblioFiles: Marie Rutkoski

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

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DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. My guest is Marie Rutkoski, author of The Kronos Chronicles, a series which currently includes the books The Cabinet of Wonders and The Celestial Globe. Set in 16th century Europe, the books parallel our world with one significant exception. In the world of the books, magic is possible, even though magical ability is rare, especially outside nobility.

In Okno, a small town outside of Prague, Petra Kronos lives with her father and relatives at their shop, The Sign of the Compass. Petra's father, Mikal Kronos, is a craftsman, blessed with a brilliant mind and a magical ability to work with metal. He is hired by Prince Rodolfo to build a fabulous clock in Prague. A clock that also has a secret power that could wreak havoc on the prince's enemies.

When master Kronos finishes the clock, the cruel prince magically removes his eyes and sends him home blind. Outraged, Petra travels to Prague to steal her father's eyes back from the Cabinet of Wonders, the prince's infamous magic collection. And to destroy the heart of the clock in the process.

In a second book in the series, The Celestial Globe, Petra and her father are once again in danger as the prince demands their capture. Petra barely escapes and finds herself in London, caught in a complex world of espionage, murder, magic, and the hunt for the Mercator Globes, a legendary set of globes that can open portals into different locations all over the world.

If you were searching for an original, ingenious, and captivating series, look no further than these books. Rutkoski weaves adventure, fantasy, magic, and history together perfectly to create a fascinating world of intrigue, danger, triumph, and friendship. The dialogue is just as fast-paced as the action, making the pages fly by and leaving you wanting more immediately after you close each book.

Marie Rutkoski joins us from New York City. Ms. Rutkoski, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. And for your kind words about the book.

DR. DANA: You're welcome. I didn't mention him in the intro, but I'd like to ask you about Astrophil, the metal spider created by Mikal Kronos as a gift for Petra. Astrophil is Petra's constant companion and adviser. How did you create such an unusual character?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Well, one of the things that I like to show in my book, or think about, is the magic of machinery or the way that-- I mean technology, to me, seems to be fascinating and magical-- technology today. I'm amazed, for example, that people are actually working on building an invisibility cloak.

DR. DANA: Really?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: I love Harry Potter. Yes. So I wanted to create this creature that kind of straddles the line between technology and magic. And I knew that I wanted him to be bookish. And I knew that I wanted him to be small. And so it seems like a natural step to go from a small kind of animal to an insect. And then the spider seemed to be the perfect choice for the bookish creature that Astrophil would be.

Because spiders have been traditionally, in Western culture, associated with craft and creativity. There's a Greek myth about the origin of the spider. The story of Arachne, who was a weaver and challenged the gods and claimed that she could weave even better than Athena. And I think she succeeded in her tasks, and some versions of the myth differ-- whether she succeeded or failed.

But in any event, she suffers for being so overly confident, and she's changed by Athena into a spider-- so weaves for the rest her life.

DR. DANA: Does this name have any special meaning or significance?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: The name means star lover. And he's actually named after a poem from the English Renaissance, which is a period that I studied for many, many years. It's a sonnet sequence called Astrophil and Stella. And it's about a young man, Astrophil, who is wildly in love with Stella.

And the fact that the raven in the first book is named Stella as a kind of joke with myself. Because instead of Astrophil being in love with Stella, in my book, he's actually terrified of her. Because Astrophil knows that in real life, real birds eat real spiders. So therefore he has a kind of irrational fear of the bird, even though he knows that logically, Stella would have no interest in eating him.

DR. DANA: Petra is probably one of the toughest female characters I've encountered in children's fiction. It's so rare to see a female lead in a fantasy adventure book, especially one as tough as Petra. How did you develop her character, and was she as tough in earlier drafts of the story?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Yes, she was. I didn't really-- I didn't edit the strengths of her character when writing the first book, or the second. She resembles my sister in a lot of ways. My sister, even though she's younger than I am, is a very strong character. She teaches high school band. And I don't think that-- yes, I don't think that you can have a job like that without being a tough person, and making certain that people listen to what you have to say.

One thing that you can see, in the second book especially, is that Petra's toughness does have a negative side to it-- can be problematic. She can be too stubborn. She can be very unwilling to see that there are multiple sides to a story. And that people might not be just good, or just bad, but could have shades of gray.

And one thing that you see over the course of the books, and especially in the third book, is her coming to understand that even though her strength serves her very well, it can also be-- not destructive, but-- it can be too much. And that sometimes you need to be able to open your heart to people, rather than insist on being so strong all the time.

DR. DANA: I am so glad you mentioned your siblings because on your website, you mention your three younger siblings, and the lies you used to tell them when you were a kid. Can you tell us a few of the really good lies?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Well, my youngest brother Jonathan bore the brunt of these lies. There's a seven year difference between the two of us. And I used to tell him that I was witch. I mean, I can remember sitting in church and whispering to him that I was a plastic surgeon, and that I was going to change his eyes to the color pink. And in the middle of church, he would scream, no! Change them back! Change them back! I don't want pink eyes! Please change them back to brown! And I told him he was adopted. I mean that's-- yeah.

I think he's forgiven me by now.

DR. DANA: Do you think being a well-practiced liar helped you to become a creative writer?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: I don't know if it helped me become a creative writer. I think it's more of a symptom of my desire to be a writer from an early age. I mean, I was so in love with books from as early as I remember that it seemed a natural step to want to create them. And so I just wanted to be a writer from a very young age. And I think that the lies were just a natural side effect of me wanting to tell stories and write them down.

DR. DANA: In the acknowledgement section of the books, you mention that some of your characters are named after, and based on actual historical figures, such as Rudolf II, Gerard Mercator, Robert Cotton, Francis Walsingham, and John Dee. I'd like to ask about John Dee in particular. Can you tell us about the real John Dee first, and then describe how you adapted him for your books?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Well, John Dee was basically the astrologer for Queen Elizabeth. He had a political role and some influence on the queen and on politics, but we don't really know to what extent. And he certainly believed in magic and in his own ability to practice it. At least I get that impression from having read his diary. One of things I studied for my dissertation was his diary for the years 1595 to 1601.

And in it he describes how he tried to induct his young son Arthur, who would have been about eight years old at the time, into the ways of sorcery. It was believed in the Renaissance-- or at least some people believed-- that children had this special access to the paranormal-- that they

were able to see things that adults couldn't. For example-- in the book *The Cabinet of Wonders*, there's a moment when John Dee puts some oil on his thumbnail and basically casts a spell on Petra while she looks at his oily fingernail. And that's based in actual documentation.

There was the belief that a small child's thumbnail could have magical properties. So John Dee, he seemed, at least, to have believed in magic and in children's ability to practice it, though apparently his son Arthur showed no aptitude for magic, and couldn't become a sorcerer. He did have two daughters named Margaret and Madinia, whom he writes about in the diary. And he also had other children, who I've conveniently ignored because I had no use for them. So I gave him two daughters who were twins. They were not twins in real life.

DR. DANA: And was he a spy? Historically-- the historic figure of John Dee, the real John Dee?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Yes. It is believed that he was a spy. It's also thought that he is the origin or the term double O seven-- you know, the James Bond double O seven--

DR. DANA: Really?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Yes. Because-- I don't know where the James Bond creators-- whether they knew that that could be traced back to John Dee, but he used double O seven to indicate a spy. The two Os were supposed to represent the queen's eyes, and seven was the number of bodily perfection. So he's the one that we can credit with coming up with that term for a spy.

I mean his actual role as a spy is not so well known because it was secret. But he does seem to have dabbled in that, at least.

DR. DANA: So in your books, John Dee is admittedly a spy. He tells Petra-- so everyone understands it. So how did you come to decide to adapt this historic figure into a fictitious character?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: He was also, in real life, an ambassador to the court of Rodolfo. So it seemed that he had to be in the book. And the way I've come to imagine the character of John Dee-- as somebody who's very Machiavellian. He sees the end game. He sees what he thinks is most important for his country, first and foremost. And he will do just about anything to get that. And the larger good is what's important to him. And he's willing to do immoral things to achieve a larger good.

And I think it's an interesting thing for me and for readers to consider, whether that's an appropriate way of looking at the world. Is it OK to do unethical things or to do harm to people, in order to do some great good for something so abstract as a country? And I pay a lot of attention to how the characters talk. Astrophil, for example-- he never uses contractions. He'll say cannot instead of can't. And that's reflective of--

DR. DANA: Oh, I didn't realize that but yes, he does.

MARIE RUTKOSKI: I mean I think maybe once or twice I had him use a contraction just because it would have seemed very awkward if he didn't. But it's a rule that he pretty much sticks by because he's somebody who loves language so much. And is so proud of his ability to speak many languages, and to read, and so forth, that he wants to speak very correctly. So you won't see him using a contraction, or doing something that's grammatically incorrect.

Neel loves language in a very different way. He loves language in a way that he absorbs anything he thinks sounds appealing. So he's a little bit like a magpie or a crow. You know, a bird that sees something shiny and decides to steal it and bring it back to its nest. So that's the way he talks.

Now John Dee, to get back to the question of him and his Machiavellian nature-- you'll notice that sometimes he speaks in a very formal way when it suits him. And then sometimes he'll sound more informal, and he will use contractions. And that's supposed to be reflective of the way that he-- he will bend and break any rule that he thinks is necessary to get what he wants. So he might not always be that way. And his character, like Petra's, does change over the course of the series.

DR. DANA: You also adapted historical concepts for your books, including the concept of a cabinet of wonders. Can you tell us what those are historically?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Sure. Many people might today have a curio cabinet. Have you heard of a curio cabinet-- like a little shelf for knickknacks and so forth?

DR. DANA: Mm-hmm.

MARIE RUTKOSKI: That term, curio cabinet, actually has its origin in a cabinet of curiosities, also known as a cabinet of wonders. Or the Germans called it a wunderkammer. And these are basically just-- they started as collections. They started as somebody's little curio cabinet, where they might have a little cabinet-- to keep repeating the word-- that had things in it like say, an ostrich egg, or a painting, or a narwhal tusk, or a horn that was believed to have grown out of a woman's head.

Just this weird sort of mix of art, and ethnography, and anthropology, natural history, et cetera. And for the very rich, in the Renaissance, these collections grew until the point where they began to fill whole rooms, and then suites of rooms, et cetera, and then eventually became what we today recognize as a museum. And I've just been really interested in these collections.

DR. DANA: I love how you mix historical fact and magic in your books. And your description of the prince's Cabinet of Wonders is a really good example of this. Would you be willing to read a passage that describes the prince's cabinet?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Absolutely. I would. I'd be happy to.

DR. DANA: I'll just add, before you begin, that Petra and her friend Neel are breaking into the cabinet, not only to steal back Petra's father's eyes, but also to locate and break the heart of the clock that Petra's father made.

MARIE RUTKOSKI: And Neel, of course, he wants money. He's involved in this because he wants some gold. He wants some jewels-- anything that will put money in his pocket.

“She {Petra} followed Astrophil deeper into the Cabinet of Wonders. Odd and beautiful objects lined their path, such as a small potted tree whose leaves were curled-up paper scrolls. Petra glanced at a paper leaf that had unfurled and saw a three-line poem written in sappy ink. Some things in the Cabinet were magnificent without being unusual, such as a blue and green life-sized statue of a peacock. Others were bizarre and unsettling, like a six-foot-tall skeleton of a mermaid strung from a pole and hanger.

Neel pulled down a box, looked inside, and made a face. Petra glanced at the box's label. ‘It says Dragon's Teeth.’

‘What am I going to do with dragon's teeth?’

‘If you plant them in the earth, they sprout soldiers,’ Astrophil said. ‘Or so I have read.’

‘Well, maybe they'll come in handy,’ Neel said doubtfully. He pulled his purse from his waist and poured in the teeth.

‘Try this.’ Petra opened a box labeled Phoenician Coins.

Neel's eyes lit up when he saw the heap of gold. But then he noticed the designs marking the coins. His face fell. ‘Those aren't Bohemian. Or Spanish. Or anything. I can't use those.’

‘You can if you melt them down.’

‘Oh. Yeah. Right.’ He began stuffing his purse.

Meanwhile, Astrophil had scrambled on top of the small box. Burned into its wood was one word: Kronos.

With trembling fingers, Petra opened the lid. There were her father's eyes, silver and familiar.

She hesitated to touch them. When she finally picked them up, she was surprised to find that they were smooth and hard like round pebbles. She carefully put them in her pocket.

She heard Neel make a delighted noise. She turned around. He had discovered a hoard of jewels carved into the shapes of various animals. There was a ruby pelican, an emerald turtle, a sapphire wolf, and a diamond dove. ‘Shame I'll have to bust these into pieces.’ He put them in his purse. ‘But I can live with that.’

Petra made a quick tour of the Cabinet, looking for something, anything, that might help her fulfill her promise to John Dee. She found powdered unicorn horn, yes. She saw a cocoon the size of her arm. But she came across nothing that resembled a piece of an enormous clock. Or a heart.

DR. DANA: I imagine that introducing magic to a story could be both burdensome and liberating for an author. It allows you to let your imagination run wild, but it also requires you to decide how it's going to function in the story, who can use it, what its properties are. Was this taxing to your imagination or was it freeing?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: It was much more freeing. I mean, I wanted to put limits to magic. I wanted it to be a rare gift. And also, some things that in some way seems like an exaggeration of the natural talents that we do have-- in the sense that some people are born with an ability to run faster than other people. And that skill seems almost magical. I mean, there's a reason why we're all fascinated by the Olympics.

I remember being really struck by the story-- I can't remember which zoo it was. But there was a tiger that leaped over a wall that was supposed to prevent any tiger from ever being able to escape. And it's a tragic story because the tiger ran loose and ended up killing people. But I mean, this tiger just happened to be extraordinary. No one would ever have expected a tiger to leap that high, but she was like the Carl Lewis of tigers.

So she just had this amazing gift-- that ended in tragedy, but nonetheless, it's still impressive. And so Petra, her father, Tomik, and Neel-- all of these characters have special abilities. But I wanted it to seem like something that could be genetically inherited. It was natural, yet extraordinary.

DR. DANA: What can we expect to discover in the remaining books in the series?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: Well, the third book, which is the final book, is called *The Jewel of the Kalderash*. And it's already written-- I just turned in the edits to my editor-- and right now I'm working on the text that's supposed to go on the inside of the book cover. So I think I'll just read what I have written so far, as long as your audience will bear in mind that it's subject to change.

Petra Kronos sails to India with the hope of finding a cure for her father, who has been transformed into a deadly monster. Petra's quest seems to be within her reach, since her magic has grown stronger, and she has the help of her friends. Yet there is only so much Petra, Tomik, Neel, and the tin spider Astrophil can do as they are swept up in an epic struggle for power.

Grounds are at stake, secrets are revealed, spies are afoot. Assassination attempts are common. Worst of all, Prince Adolpho is close to becoming emperor, and ruling half of Europe. Will Petra be able to save the people she loves? What might she have to sacrifice to do it? Her search for answers will take her to castles and cities, through mountains, and even underwater, as she tests her strength, feels the first stirrings of romance, and risks her life.

DR. DANA: You also hinted that something might be happening to Astrophil. That there would be consequences when he's discovered, towards the end of the second book. Is he going to be OK?

MARIE RUTKOSKI: People are very concerned about Astrophil.

DR. DANA: I know.

[INTERPOSING VOICES]

MARIE RUTKOSKI: I mean, when I-- I do some school visits, and children as well as adults seem to be really attached to him, which warms my heart a great deal, because I based Astrophil on the sort of geeky, book-loving side of me. I'm the sort of person who would be perfectly happy spending an entire day in a rare books room. I mean, Astrophil-- the stakes are high in the third book. And pretty much, I would say every main character-- Petra, as well as her friends, who have become very important in the series-- all of them are going to face some dangers, including Astrophil.

DR. DANA: Marie Rutkoski, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

MARIE RUTKOSKI: It was my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

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