

The BiblioFiles Presents: Victoria Jamieson

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

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Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is multiple-award winning, and *New York Times* best-selling graphic novelist, Victoria Jamieson. Beginning with her illustrated book, *SUPER COW*, in the third grade, Jamieson aspired to work as an animator. After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design with a focus in illustration, her career path involved art and design work, but her life path involved being a roller derby player for the Rose City Rollers in Portland, Oregon. Jamieson merged these work and life experiences together to create her 2015 graphic novel, *Roller Girl*. It went on to be a *New York Times* bestseller, a Newbery Honor book, and an inspiration to thousands of novice skaters wanting to sport a Jammer star.

Roller Girl was followed by *All's Faire in Middle School*, to shorter graphic novels in her *Pets on the Loose* series, and the picture books *Olympig!*, *Pest in Show*, and *Bea Rocks the Flock*. Her most recent release is *When Stars Are Scattered*, which was done in collaboration with Omar Mohamed, the founder of Refugee Strong, a nonprofit that empowers refugee students. Illustrated by Jamieson, the graphic novel is the true story of Mohamed's childhood in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. It was a National Book Award finalist in 2020.

The magic of graphic novels is how completely the reader enters the world of the characters. Jamieson is especially talented at the emotional journeys her characters take. She is fearless in exploring the difficulty of going to a new school, getting in a fight with your friends, being bullied, a family argument, or in the case of her recent collaboration, the pain of uncertainty as refugees wait for change. These are difficult topics, but Jamieson weaves hope into everything she writes and draws, inspiring her readers to face these difficulties and become stronger in the process.

Victoria Jamieson, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk with you.

DR. DANA: When did you first discover graphic novels?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Well, I wasn't a huge comics reader growing up. I wasn't really into comic books. We read the Sunday comics in the newspaper, so I always love things like *Calvin and Hobbes*, and *For Better For Worse*.

But in terms of graphic novels, I never really got to know them or started reading them until I was an adult. And the first one I remember reading was *Smile* by Raina Telgemeier. That was kind of a ground breaker for schools and libraries really embracing graphic novels as a way of reading for kids.

DR. DANA: Your debut graphic novel, *Roller Girl*, is absolutely epic. Please tell us about your roller derby days, and how the story of your character, Astrid, came to be.

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Yeah, so as an adult I was living in Portland, Oregon, and I started playing roller derby. I actually heard about roller derby through a book, which is typical because I love to read. It was a book that the movie, *Whip It*, was based on. There's a movie about roller derby with Drew Barrymore and Elliott Page. It's a wonderful movie.

I read that book and I was like, what's roller derby? So I went to go see a match and it was amazing, so I started playing roller derby. And I just became so obsessed with the sport, and I just wanted to talk about it all the time. I decided to write a book about it.

DR. DANA: And was it difficult to launch into the format of a graphic novel, or did you always visualize that this was how it was going to be?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Well, I had been working-- I had made books before this, so I had done picture books, as you mentioned in the intro. I had written and illustrated a few picture books. I always knew that I loved telling stories with pictures and words.

And I knew I wanted to write a book about roller derby, but I didn't know exactly how to do it because I thought-- like a picture book didn't seem to make sense for roller derby because picture books are usually meant for younger kids, and roller derby is a bit older. It's a bit more rough and

tumble. And I didn't see how a picture book can be made about roller derby, or one that I could do.

So that's when I read Raina Telgemeier's book, *Smile*. And it is like a light bulb went off that I could tell a longer story for older kids, but I could still use visual storytelling along with written storytelling. And I just love the combination of words and pictures together. So it wasn't brand new because I'd done picture books, so I'd already had some experience with working with words and pictures together. So it was kind of an intro to my first graphic novel.

DR. DANA: What was your roller derby name?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: It was Winnie the Pow. I wanted a book that-- I wanted a name that had to do with children's books. And at that point in time, roller derby was still fairly new, so there was a-- you couldn't take someone's name. There is like a worldwide list of derby names, so a lot of the names I really loved were already taken. Like I remember I wanted Nancy Drew Blood. But that was taken. My other back up was Encyclopedia Frown, but I went with Winnie the Pow.

DR. DANA: In the history of the Newbery Award, there have been only three graphic novels that have been honored or awarded. *Roller Girl* is one of them. So congratulations! Do you have any advice for new readers discovering graphic novels like yours, or young artists currently filling up sketchbooks with their drawings?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Yeah, I guess those would be two different pieces of advice. Because actually, when people come to graphic novels, especially parents or some teachers still have a lot of resistance to graphic novels, and that it's not real reading-- "real" in quotes, reading. And as a parent, I can see why you might think that. But if you sit down and read graphic novels, you'll see that there's a lot of really, really intense or really complex problem solving that readers are doing as they read graphic novels.

Something I like to do in my graphic novels is have the picture say one thing and the words say another. So maybe my character looks nervous, but she's saying, "I'm fine." And as a reader you have to decide, well, which one is telling the truth?

Is a picture telling the truth? Are the words telling the truth? Do I believe what I see with my eyes, or what I'm hearing with my ears? And that can be really complex. And this happens in all sorts of graphic novels. My son is six, and we were reading *Dog Man* the other night. And I don't know if you know *Dog Man*, but it's full of fart jokes. And it would be easy to write off is like just fluff.

But it does a lot of those things too where the pictures will show one thing, and the character says another. And it really takes some real thinking skills to balance the two. So I guess that's what I would say to new readers to graphic novels. There are so many wonderful graphic novels out there that, if the first one you read doesn't strike a chord, pick up another. There's so many wonderful ones.

And as to young illustrators who are filling their sketchbooks, I visit with schools all the time and young writers, virtually this year of course. And I just like to-- at a certain point, a lot of kids start comparing their artwork to other people and thinking, "Oh, I'm not as good as that person. I'm not a real artist because I can't draw as well as someone else."

I think drawing is a skill that you get better at. So even if you get frustrated, if you like to draw just keep drawing. You can definitely get better, just like you can with any skill. So keep it up.

DR. DANA: Like *Roller Girl*, *All's Faire in Middle School* is also semi-autobiographical. Like Emma Jean, you worked at a Renaissance Fair in Florida when you were in high school. Is there any Renaissance Fair scene in the graphic novel that absolutely happened to you?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Let's see. Well, when I worked at a Renaissance Fair, I was 16. I was in high school. I was volunteering there with my two friends. So there's a character in the book-- I forget what we named him in the book, but in real life his name was Broom. It was this juggler who-- we were 16. My friends and I were just goofing around all day, and we were obsessed with this juggler. So the crush that Emma Jean has on the juggler is definitely based in real life. Poor Broom.

DR. DANA: Your graphic novels are about people, families, classmates, and the sometimes difficult relationships they have. But no one is truly bad or evil. However, in your *Pets on the Loose* series, I can think of one hilarious character that definitely qualifies as bad, but is also

completely hilarious. I am speaking of Harriet the mouse. Was it different creating what we might call a villainess in one of your stories?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: I'm so glad you asked about Harriet. No one ever asks me about Harriet. I love Harriet. Those books were quite different because I have three graphic novels for older readers that I try really-- they tell kind of serious stories. I want them to be fun and entertaining, but I also want to have some deep heart in them. And with the *Pets on the Loose* series, they're two books for younger readers. They're much shorter, they're intended for younger audiences.

And I remember writing them and just having so much fun writing those stories. With a lot of my books, there's so much struggle and it's so hard to write a book. But for those books, for some reason, it was just super fun. And I think writing a villain was part of that. It was just fun to write a little-- she's like a little teeny tiny mouse. The story is about pets in a school, so each pet is from a different grade. And it's like the good pets versus the fourth and fifth grade pets, who are the bad pets. And it's just really fun to draw this little mouse who has a little Napoleon complex and just tries to make life miserable.

DR. DANA: I also want to say, though, that the snake is just neutral. The snake is just out for herself. She's just like, "I'm hungry."

VICTORIA JAMIESON: [LAUGHING] Yeah.

DR. DANA: I'll go along with it.

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Lucinda is the fifth grade pet, a snake, and yes, she just eats mice.

DR. DANA: *When Stars Are Scattered* is your most recent graphic novel. It's the result of a collaboration with Omar Mohamed. It's the story of his childhood in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. When did you first meet Mohamed and how did you two decide to collaborate on his story?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Well, Omar and I met when I went to his place of work. In Portland, I had started volunteering with a refugee resettlement agency. So there are these agencies, in most towns in America, where new refugees to the United States can find assistance in getting

apartments, learning English, finding a job. I'd been doing some volunteering like that in Portland.

And from that experience, I'd been hearing so many stories from my volunteer training and from people I was meeting. I was already starting to think like what would a graphic novel look like that would share the story of one of these stories I'm hearing? And so when I moved to Pennsylvania with my family in 2017, I went to another refugee resettlement agency with this in mind.

And I was speaking to some of the workers there, telling them I'm a graphic novelist. And they said, you should talk to Omar. He's sitting right over there at that desk. He's a social worker with Church World Service. And he had been working on his memoir for adults, and he was looking for a co-author. And so we sat down to talk about what a collaboration might look like.

And I told him, I make graphic novels for kids. That's kind of where my brain always goes, and would he ever think about writing his book for kids? So we had to really sit down and talk about what that would look like, and if it was something he could see his story being.

And it took a while for us to decide, OK, let's do this. Let's try it and see what happens. So it was a leap of faith for both of us, I'd say, in the beginning.

DR. DANA: Your picture books and graphic novels are often written from your personal experiences. How different was it to illustrate another person's story? And since it took place in a very different setting from America, what was it like for you as an artist?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Yeah, it was quite different. And the main question I asked myself through the whole process was, "Should I be here? Should I be even telling this story? It's not my story. What right do I have to be telling a story that's so different than my own?" But I think what saw me through those points was Omar being there as my co-author and saying, "No, I want to tell this story." He was looking for a way to bring his story to more people. He always says he likes being a voice for the voiceless. Because there are millions of refugees. He's only one person.

But having a story out there is a voice for those who can't tell their story. So, yeah, it was quite different. It was easier in some ways because I didn't have to make up a story on my own.

The story was there. And Omar and I worked. We did have to change some aspects of the story to make sure it flowed and worked as a book for kids. So was-- it was a different experience.

And I do want to say I'm sorry that Omar couldn't join us today. He has been back in Dadaab, the refugee camp where he grew up, with his non-profit organization. And he's been traveling back, and we weren't sure-- his travel just kept him from being at this interview today.

DR. DANA: Thank you. And thank you Omar for your beautiful story. We just like to acknowledge that, and your work with others. So as an artist drawing Omar's world, what did you need to do to create this for your readers?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: So for the drawings, I relied on the internet quite a bit. I watched some documentaries in Dadaab. I looked at photographs on Google images. Omar didn't have a ton of-- he didn't have any photographs of himself when he was a kid, or life when he was a kid. He had a few photographs that are at the end of the book that are right as he's about to leave Dadaab.

So yeah, I had to look at photographs. And even with photographs, it required a lot of back and forth between me and Omar because a lot of photos I was seeing were from recent years-- 2015 or 2014. And he said, a lot has changed since he lived there, in the early days of Dadaab. He arrived just as it was being set up by the United Nations.

And as hundreds of thousands of people arrived there, it's gone through lots of changes. So we had to make sure the photos I was using were accurate to when he was a kid. So even using photos, we had to make sure they were being really accurate.

DR. DANA: Looking at your creative career, now that you have a number of graphic novels to your name, is the process for writing and drawing them the same, or has it changed between *Roller Girl* and *When Stars Are Scattered*?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Let's see. I always think the next book will be easier because I've done it before, and I'm like, oh. I got this thing. I know how to write a book. But I think any author will tell you that every book is different, and every time you sit down to start a new one you're like, what? How do I do this? I have no idea how to start a new project.

And every book is different, so every book has a new process. So no, I don't really think I've gotten better, per se. Maybe I've streamlined my habits. So creating the art maybe is a little easier because I have a routine for that now, but the writing is still always just a struggle of making something out of nothing.

DR. DANA: Would you consider yourself more of a writer or more of an illustrator? Or, for graphic novels, is that not a very fair question to ask?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: No, I think it's definitely fair question to ask. And it's funny because I always think of myself more as an illustrator because I find that part easier and more fun. And I really struggle a lot with the writing and just getting the story exactly right.

But maybe that means I'm more of a writer because I'm much more particular about having a story completely, completely perfect. With the artwork, I'm willing to let things slide and be like, it's imperfect but it's got my-- it's me. I don't know which one I really am, but I would say I struggle more with the writing, and I have more fun with the art.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Well, I'm working on a new project. I'm not allowed to give the title yet. It's still top secret. But it's much different than *When Stars Are Scattered*. And it's been a really nice project because, working on *When Stars Are Scattered* was-- it was pretty tough at sometimes. It's a rough story. It's about kids living in a refugee camp, and that's a lot to think about that day in day out for two years. It was a lot.

So for the past year, I've been working on a much lighter story, kind of fun and full of pranks and hijinks. And it's been-- it was, frankly, a really nice escape for this pandemic year. It was just, with so much going around and I was stuck in my studio anyway, it was nice to have this imaginary world of fun and laughter to escape into every day.

DR. DANA: Victoria Jamieson, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

VICTORIA JAMIESON: Oh, thank you for having me. It's been lovely.