

Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Our guest today is Tish Rabe, author, producer, singer/songwriter and publisher, specializing in children's content across multiple platforms. She's created a company with a unique business model and has partnered with some of the biggest names in the business. She's here to talk about what she does, and the state of kids content. It's not just books any more. Welcome Tish, welcome to the podcast.

TR: I'm thrilled to be here.

VC: So, let's start from the beginning. So tell us about your background and how you got into this business.

TR: Well, as a matter of fact, I'm always thrilled to say this to people, (singing) I started out to be an opera singer. I went to college to be an opera singer (end singing). I actually have a four year degree in opera with a minor in jazz from Ithaca College school of music and I came to New York in the 70s convinced that I would be a star in approximately one year. I told my parents, who died in their 90s, that it wasn't going to happen in six months, but a year. It's just going to be fine. It didn't exactly work out with all the auditions and this that and the other thing. But I was lucky enough to have a high school music teacher who was the assistant music director for Sesame Street. And I met him in New York and said, "Mr. Connor, I have been auditioning all over the place and every time anyone says to me, (singing) You have a beautiful voice, I knew I wasn't going to get a job." "And unfortunately, that's what happened. However, I had this music degree where the ink wasn't dry and he needed a secretary—we called them secretary back then—and I started at the music department of Sesame Street, Season 4. And my first job—Kat, you won't believe it, was hiring the other jingle singers in New York to sing for the Muppets. And all I wanted to do was sing for the Muppets. So, I sang all day. (singing) I sang when I typed, I sang when I filed, and I sang when I answered the phone, Sesame Street, may I help you? (End singing). Well, I drove everybody so crazy that after about a year one of the composers said, "I've got a recording tomorrow for this song with Oscar, do you want to sing backup? (KK: Oh!) I need two people to sing backup" and my big break, which always cracked my mother up, was (singing) "I love trash anything dirty, and dusty, anything ragged, rotten and rusty, oh I love, I love trash." (End singing) That was my big break in show business.

KK: That's amazing.

VC: And who was the music director at the time, Tish?

TR: The music director at that point was Joe Raposo, who wrote the theme we all know and of course he's famous for writing Being Green.

KK: He was a big influence for me. I spent years singing and I had tremendous... four of his songs, it was called the Sesame Street medley and I ended with Being Green which is, I would still do it today.

TR: Ah! We'll sing a duet. We'll get together, we'll sing (KK: Sounds good. VC: I love it!)

TR: And of course, to lead into today's conversation, at that time, at Sesame Street, they were looking for books. They had this huge successful show which was a bit of a surprise, I admit. A lot of people didn't think it was going to be so successful, and all of a sudden, they're all over the place trying to find books and they literally said to those of us who worked there, if you've got a book idea, come on down, every 2:00 on Thursdays they had pitch meetings. And I don't know why I thought of this but I went flying downstairs, and when I was six, I had a little kitten and she ran into the kitchen and I hit the table and broke my grandmother's antique teapot and I was so worried my mother was going to be mad. She was in the backyard and she came in and she saw all this broken glass, and she said, you know what, I love you more than any old dusty teapot. (VC Aww) So I went down that afternoon and I pitched this thing there was dead silence in the pitch meeting until the senior editor for Sesame Street books said, "Could you make it a story for Bert?" And I said "Sure, Bert, I'm all over it." (laughter). And Bert and the Broken Teapot came out for Sesame Street and the same thing that happened to me happens to Bert. He helps David in David's restaurant. He breaks David's favorite teapot. He spends the whole book trying to get it fixed, finally tells David he broke it, and David says, "My friend Bert is more important to me than any teapot."

KK: I love it, this is wonderful. It's such a great story.

TR: It got great reviews, people wrote in, it was a message that was important at the time, and after that, seriously, I was on a roll. I've written 182 children's books and I literally just wrote for everybody, Blue's Clues, Curious George, Bear and the Big Blue House, Clifford, Pete and the Big Wide World and on and on.

KK: It's an amazing story. You know, you think your career's going one way and all of a sudden, there you are!

TR: It's true. Singing on the phone and singing for Bert! (laughter). Now tell us more about the company you've created now. It's interesting because as you know, I've written for all the major publishers, everybody, and I started to think a little bit about, was there a way to do books in sort of a different and unique way and I thought, you know, there are issues out there that don't necessarily warrant hundreds and hundreds of thousands of copies of this book. There are unique issues that could help kids, parents, caregivers, teachers that we could get out there quickly number one, inexpensively number two, and reach a specific audience who needs the help. And in June 2020 I was home in the height of Covid and I decided you know what, I'm not ready to retire and let me give this a try. And the first thing that happened, I am a big believer in getting free books into the hands of needy kids. After my lifetime at Sesame Street and it has been a lifetime, to understand that in 2023 there are millions of children in this country that do not have one book in the house. But a friend of mine asked me if I knew about Pajama Program. Pajama Program is a nonprofit, they've been around for 25 years, a wonderful organization. And they give free pajamas, new pajamas, and storybooks to children facing difficult life situations, and I was so excited to hear about them that I went into their office and I said, how can I help you. Can I help you raise money for books, can I get you some pajamas and they explained to me that they had a challenge, which was they wanted to help parents learn comforting bedtime routines for these kids to help them get ready for sleep so these children and all children and all people can thrive. And I immediately had an idea that I could create a rhyming, gentle storybook and you know I have my background in singing so we'll put in a lullaby, you have to sing, right? And in the back, I would put in the parent tips. And because I am a 100% rhyming author, what if I put the parent tips in in rhyme? So, for instance, "30 to 60 minutes before you tuck them in, is the perfect time for your bedtime routine to begin." Keep'em simple, keep'em rhyming. And the book came out and has been wildly successful, and we have done a version in Spanish, and as of Friday we are putting out a version in Ukrainian for the Ukrainian refugee children who are here and struggling to learn English. Very simple, not a lot of text, but sweet and lovely.

KK: How old are the children, for the books we're discussing?

TR: Yes, this particular book, it's called Sweet Dreams Ahead, Time for Bed, and it's for zero to four. And what it does in the book, it literally takes you through the steps of getting ready for bed. "It's time for us to end our day, time to tuck the day away." And then you go through, brush your teeth, take a bath, get into pajamas, read a book and go to sleep. Very calming, very soothing and it's just been wildly successful.

KK: Now this is interesting that you found out about this organization and your company is now part of it. How do you determine how to partner with somebody, or how to collaborate with someone?

TR: That's a good question, and the mission of our company is really to create not only books, we've written some songs and some videos that help children, parents, teachers and caregivers. So, when we meet a potential partner, we can immediately tell if their mission is aligned with our mission. And we have created a very funny book—I think it's funny—called Days Can be Sunny for Bunnies and Money which helps 4- to 7-year-olds, learn how to manage money. And that came about because I kept hearing from the librarians and schools – I do a lot of school author visits—that there was very little to tell kids how to earn, save and spend and in my book, I added give. I wanted kids to understand at a young age that you can help a little bit, if you can, and that book has done very well, it really did fulfill a need to help kids learn about money, how to manage money. It's very exciting.

VC: It is, I think what you do is exciting, now you're really more of a multi-media enterprise, is that right? Because you've done things other than, just books.

TR: Yeah, at this point I think I've written pretty close to 300 children's songs for broadcast television. I was one of the lead songwriters for 3-2-1 Contact, back in the day, and I've written for Nickelodeon, Sesame Street, Disney and for a while I was the singing voice of Cinderella for Book and Audio, (sings) Every beautiful princess you happen to see is learning the alphabet from A to Z (end singing) I sang for Cinderella for a while (laughter). So, singing, music, songs, the lullaby from Sweet Dreams Ahead, it's Time for Bed is written to the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star (sings) Night is here today is done, it's time to sleep my little one (end singing) So what we do is try to make it as simple as we can. One thing I'm passionate about is urging everyone to speak and sing to their kids. What I say to everybody is to your child, your voice is the most beautiful thing there is to hear. And we provide tracks for singing, I try to provide tracks for people to sing with. But it doesn't matter, whatever your voice sounds like, if you hit the notes, if you're not even close, it doesn't matter, we just urge everybody to sing to their kids.

KK: Now has the social media and visual media influenced children's literature, has changed what you have been doing?

TR: I think what's happening is, it's easier now to reach audiences. You know, Vanessa and I go back to Sesame Street and it was always, how do you, where are these people and how do we reach them? And that's so much easier now. And the interesting thing that I found, post-Covid, was that interestingly enough, the children's book industry is doing just great, and what really happened, which you never see coming, is everyone got so burned out with screens—you know, Zoom meetings and seeing the grandparents on Zoom,

Santa's on Facetime, that the book, holding the book, reading the book, reading the picture book, reading the book, turning the pages, is now stronger than ever because in a funny way there was a big lag there when we were all just looking at people on screens.

VC: Right, and you know, the New York Times even has a bestseller list for children's books. Do you think this has helped enhance the popularity of actual books for kids?

TR: I do, I think that people recognize that the activity of holding a child in your lap with a book in front of both of you, turning the pages... it's also very interesting because children's books can be used as diagnostic tools. For a long time, I worked with a charity that gave out books at pediatricians' offices, Well Visit, and they could literally hand a free book to a little child and if the little child held it upside down, or dropped it, or didn't know what it was, didn't understand how to turn the pages, that told them a little bit about the child's developmental state. So, books are very, very powerful for this audience.

KK: It seems that all these beautiful ideas you have, I was going to ask you if the current news has changed kids' ideas of the world?

TR: The world has changed, the pace has changed, the ... everything's changed. But kids are kids. Kids are at the heart, kids. They care about their parents, they care about their siblings, they care about their dogs. And two things that are big for me is that I always write with heart. Many authors, it's hip, it's cool, everybody's cool, everybody's... you know...but in the end the heart tug is important because you have to reach—I have a little book called *The I Believe Bunny*, and at the end it says, something about, “just like the I believe bunny, you may get a surprise. You can make a difference, even a bunny your size.” And it's just that hug right at the end. And I write, with my books, I write the last page first. Because the last page in a children's book is the most important real estate you have because you have to sum up exactly what the point of the book was and then you shut the book and the child goes to sleep, and many times nap or go to bed and that will resonate in their hearts what it was you said last.

KK: I'm curious, how many pages are in the book?

TR: The books vary. Tish Rabe Books, we are basically are 24. All children's books are either 24 or 32. The Dr. Seuss books I wrote for years are 42. That's a lot to read to a child before they go to bed, those books take a long time to read. So, for the *Sweet Dreams* book, for instance, it's 24 pages, rhythmic, in lullaby singing, so for us right now we're sort of focused on 24.

VC: How did you arrive at these numbers? Was it like trial and error, or, how did that come about?

TR: Well, it's interesting. There are standard book publishing lengths and part of that is the print costs. One thing that happened during Covid was the paper shortage hit everybody, the supply chain and paper costs so we at the moment, although we are ready to do some hardcover books all our books are soft cover. So, the other thing we try to do in our company is keep the price to the parent low. So, our books are between \$6.99 and \$10.99, so that as many children as we can could get a book.

KK: Where does the distribution and the actual pulling together of the book happen?

TR: Well, it's very interesting, during Covid I had launched this brand-new company and I had to get these books printed. The growth for me was I had always been a deliver the words person and all of a sudden, a year later there's a box of books on my porch because you get ten free books when you're a children's book author. Now suddenly I'm responsible for printing, art direction, find an illustrator, put the book together, on and on. And I was very nervous. We got print estimates from Nebraska, Wisconsin, Louisiana, and I said to my husband, my first order for Pajama Program was 20,000 books, and I said to him, what do we do if they don't allow trucks to cross state lines? And our art director knew a printer in New Haven, Connecticut. And I live in Mystic, CT and New Haven, USA, right? And I said at that point, what would be the worst thing? We get in our car and drive to pick up the 20,000 books and drive them into Manhattan for Pajama Program. How worse is it going to be? So, we were very, very lucky at our company that we could print in the United States. He's right down the street there. (VC Wow) And that has really helped.

VC: Wow. So how do you keep current with what's happening in the world of kid's content?

TR: I am a staunch believer that the true heroes in America are the teachers. Between first and second grade teachers and school librarians. It's amazing to really talk to the people with their feet on the ground about what is going on out there. And the school librarians will tell you that the same books go out the door every single day-come back, go out, come back, go out. And one of the things that I'm working on now which sort of fascinates me is the graphic novel format. We are having a lot of children who struggle to read a book that looks like a book. The kind of fun thing about the graphic novel format is it looks like a comic book but it's still a story, it's still got words, a beginning, middle and end and a lot of the classic children's books are being converted to graphic novels. I'm creating original content with the ones we're working on, but yesterday I took out *The Babysitter's Club*, Ann Martin, we used to work on Scholastic years ago and they've taken the content

and put it into a whole new format to try to help struggling and reluctant readers. So that's a perfect example of a new way to take the same material and stories with these girls babysitting and put it into a new format.

KK: Coming up with new ideas, that's for sure. (VC: Yeah, right)

TR: And the fun thing about what our company's doing is I'm writing books about topics—let me put it this way—I never would imagine that I was going to be writing a book for kids about money. What I did was I created these three bunny triplets. And bunnies are tough in children's literature because the minute you say bunny everybody thinks Easter bunny, fuzzy little chicks, right? What I wanted was hip bunnies and we found an illustrator in the UK and they're a riot. They are triplets. Honey Fern likes to earn; Sunny Dave likes to save; and Funny Ben likes to spend. But I had to put a little spin on it so that the 4- to 7-year-olds we are having read that book didn't think it was too baby... too young. So, challenging but fun.

VC: So, you tend to focus on the younger age groups. Did you ever think of doing something for the tweens and teens?

TR: That's really true. I absolutely specialize in zero to 8 and what we do, is that there are two sections of that. There's zero to 4 which is the Sweet Dreams book, Sweet Little Yum, and then there's 4 to 7 and 4 to 8 which is kindergarten, first, a little bit into second grade. I've never had any talent for or imagined how anybody writes for middle grade. My hat is off to everybody. It is not my gift, for sure

VC: Now Tish, you and I come from Sesame Street and we are very familiar with the research model, the way Sesame Street does research on their content. Do you do anything like that with your work?

TR: You know it's funny, I mostly, when the kids were little, my youngest is 32, but when they were little, I used to have them read my books out loud. And one thing I urge everybody out there who is a writer, whether it's children's books or a script for a screenplay, the big thing was to have somebody who has no idea what you're working on read it back to you out loud. Not your husband who's been hearing you talk about it for the past six months, somebody out of nowhere. And with rhyme, when I had one of the kids read it back to me, and now my grandchildren read it back to me, if they stumble on a word, you know you have to fix it. So, I think that has really helped me, because when you write in your head all the time and you put it down on the page to get a new point of view from someone who's never seen it is really powerful.

VC: You actually answered the next question I was going to ask which is advice for aspiring content creators which you just answered beautifully.

TR: What I tell people about writing for children, just a couple of things. Number one, you do not have to have kids to write for kids. Many of the greats out there have not had kids. Start with Beatrix Potter and go on, right? What I do believe in my heart is it helps to remember what it felt like to be a kid, remember things from your childhood that resonate still. I definitely urge them to, beginning, middle and end. The story's got to go someplace and then come back to somewhere. And the last two, obviously, write the last page first. There are a lot of great ideas for books and any kind of content but you get started and off you go, but what's the ending, what's the punch line, where are we going? What is the message? So those are just a few I often tell people. The other, I carry paper and pencils and pens everywhere. In the car, in my husband's car, next to the bed, in my office, on the floor, you know because ideas will come to you from the strangest oddball place and I tell everybody that ideas are like snowflakes. If you don't write them down, they disappear

VC: Now last but certainly not least, how can people learn more about you and your work?

TR: OK, I appreciate that. Our website is tishrabebooks dot com. And on our website you can find our books, there are songs, there are all kinds of resources. I'm also very proud to share with the two of you, because this is breaking news, after a year of complicated paperwork, my company has been named a federally certified company by the woman-owned small business administration of the Small Business Administration. And the reason I worked so hard to get that is that I really want to reach the federally funded organizations that help families—Headstart, Department of Defense for the Army and the Navy, Department of Education, we are poised to create material for them to help these families. I am part of a military family and I support the children of those who serve any way we can.

VC: Congratulations on that certification. I'm sure that's going to open a lot of doors for you.

TR: It was a lot of work but it was worth it.

VC: Absolutely. Well, Tish, thank you so much for being with us and for sharing all of this wonderful information.

TR: I really appreciate it. It's fun to get—when you're running a tiny children's publishing company it's wonderful to get the word out.

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