

Writing the Coast: The Official Podcast of the BC and Yukon Book Prizes

Transcript for Season 3 Episode 3 featuring Gail Anderson-Dargatz, author of *The Ride Home*, a finalist for the 2021 Sheila A. Egoff Children's Literature Prize

Megan Cole: Hello, and welcome to Writing the Coast. I'm your host, Megan Cole. And Writing the Coast is the official podcast of the BC and Yukon Book Prizes. This is your destination for conversations with the finalists of the BC and Yukon Book Prizes, as well as interviews with book lovers from across the province and territory.

Gail Anderson-Dargatz: My writing name is Gail Anderson-Dargatz. I've been writing for it seems like a very long time now, but 30 years. My first novel was *The Cure for Death by Lightning*. And my second novel was *A Recipe for Bees*. And both of those books were shortlisted for the Giller Prize. I've had quite a bit of success with my novels. They've largely been national bestsellers. My most recent literary novel is *The Spawning Grounds*, and I'm about to release a thriller, a commercial thriller, which is something quite a bit different, and it's called *The Almost Wife* and it's going to be out this July, July 6th. I also write high-low books. So, these are high interest, low vocabulary books for both adults and children who are working on their literacy skills. So, I have a whole bunch of those as well. And of course, *The Ride Home* is one of them.

Megan: Gail is my guest for this episode. And she is the author of many books, including *The Almost Wife*. She also works with a lot of authors on their books, and blurbs books and so on. So, she knows a lot about characters and her books and those of others. And when I asked her if she could be a character in any book, who she would be, this is what she said.

Gail: Well, you know, I just finished reading one right now. And that's Carla Funk's book, and it's called *Mennonite Valley Girl*. It's actually a memoir. I was asked to read it for a blurb, and I actually fell in love with it. I think the reason I fell in love with it is because the character could have been me. I really related to the, you know, Carla and herself as a young woman growing up in the BC interior. It was such a nostalgic journey for me to go back to that girl I was through Carla. I think it will be that for a lot of people.

Megan: Gail is the author of *The Ride Home*, which is a finalist for the 2021 Sheila A. Egoff children's literature prize. And she starts our conversation with a reading from the book.

Gail: [Reading from *The Ride Home*] The bus ambles out of town, rocking back and forth down the highway. City transit isn't exactly quiet, but at least people keep to themselves. The kids on this bus, on the other hand, are *nuts*. Half of them is screaming at each other. The other half are yelling just to make themselves heard as they talk to their friends.

One orange-haired kid is hurling bits of cheese. *Cheese*. The only kids who are quiet and keeping to themselves so the kindergarten kids' right up front. Oh, and that weird girl in the third row. She's got these massive headphones, like, noise-cancelling headphones. I wish I had a pair.

Gross. Now Jeremy and Sophie are *really* kissing in the seat. I mean, there's tongue action.

Jeremy catches me squinting at them in disgust and disbelief. He stops kissing and gives me the stink eye. "Do you *mind*?" he asks. "A little privacy, please?"

Privacy? On a school bus?

Then he goes back to snogging the girl. That's it. I'm out of here. I grab my backpack and stand up, steadying myself with a hand on the back of a seat as I try to figure out who to sit with. A skinny kid with blue bangs shakes his head. Okay, I won't sit with him. A girl in yoga pants shifts towards the aisle. Her neither then. I take another step forward, but the bus careens around a sharp corner and I tumble over the seat and headfirst into Emo. I find myself cozying up to Mr. Grim Reaper.

Then the driver suddenly brakes, hurling me sideways into the aisle as she turns abruptly into a pullout. She gets out of her seat and stomps down the aisle as I pick myself up. Now that the driver is standing, I realize just how short she is. I'm sure some of the fourth graders have taller than her. But the expression on her face it's just plain scary.

"Uh-oh?" says Emo.

"Hey!" the driver calls out. "You! New kid!"

"My name is Mark."

"Don't give me lip."

"I wasn't -- I was just telling you my name."

She tilts her head up to talk to me.

"Argue with me, and you'll get a memo."

"A what? "

Emo nudges me. "You don't want that," he says quietly. "A memo is a note you have to take home. It says you got in trouble. Get three and you could be kicked off the bus. I've got two."

"But I didn't do anything!" I say.

The driver wags a finger at me. "You got up and switch seats while the bus was moving. I do that all the time in the city buses."

"School buses?"

"No. City transit."

She pushes back her fedora. "Didn't you read the Bus Riders Code of Conduct?"

"The *what*?"

"The bus rules that the school sent home with you."

I glanced back at Jeremy and Sophie. They've stopped making out, for the moment. I suspect they didn't get a copy of the Bus Riders Code of Conduct either. "Nobody said anything home with me," I tell the driver. "I just started school today. I lived in Vancouver until Friday."

"What happened?" the cheese-hurling kid calls out from several seats down. "You get expelled or something?"

I scowl at him. "None of your business."

But Cheese Kid won't let it go. "No, really? What did you do? You hit a teacher? I bet you hit a teacher."

The driver reaches up to hold the finger to my face. "On this bus, you don't get up and walk around while the bus is moving. Understand?" "But they were making out back there." I wave a hand at Jeremy and Sophie. "I didn't want to see *that* all the way home."

"Jeremy, is that true?" the driver asks. "Don't lie to me. All I have to do is review the security footage to find out." She points up at the camera mounted on the ceiling above the emergency exit. Jeremy nods and mumbles. Then he pushes Sophie's legs off his lap and she falls into the aisle. The girl sheepishly gets up and slides over to the other single seat.

"This isn't the place for that kind of thing," the driver says. "I'm separating you two. Jeremy, go sit in the front seat."

He stands. "With the kindies? No way."

"You want another memo?" the driver asks. "You get a third and you won't be riding this bus anymore."

"My mom will kill me," Jeremy says.

"Yes, she will." The driver gestures forward with both hands like, a flight attendant. "To the front."

On his way past me, Jeremy slugs my arm. "You'll pay for this," he says.

Once she gets back up front, the driver calls out to me. "And you!" Now that the kids are quiet, watching us her voice carries all the way to the back of the bus.

"My name is Mark!" I shout back.

The drivers snorts. "If I know a kid's name, is because he keeps getting into trouble. I can see I'm going to remember *your* name. So, *Mark*, if you do you need to change seats, do it when we stopped to let a kid off. But only with my permission. Understand?"

I look back at Jeremy's girl and the empty seat beside her. She glares at me. I'm not sitting back there again. "Can I move now?" I asked the driver.

Megan: I'm curious about how you got involved in started in writing high low books? And what interested you about writing that genre?

Gail: Well, many years ago, I guess it's about 15, maybe closer to 20 years ago, I was asked to do a high low book for its ABC literacy group. And they were asking writers from across Canada to do books a high low book for adults because they recognize that a great many people who were improving their

literacy skills or we're new to the country and improving their English, we're really struggling to find books that were aimed at adults, but at a lower reading level. So I was asked to do that. And I jumped on it because my mom did literacy tutoring, and I saw how important it was. So, I wrote that first book, which was *The Stalker*, and it was published by Grassroots Press, and found myself really challenged to write to write the book because they were very, very hard to write. In fact, I found them harder to write than a literary but by far, because you really have to pay attention to every word and have to explain any word or concept that is a bit more complicated. So, they're a real challenge to write but also fell in love with the process of writing them and wrote some other ones and then I started to write them for Orca.

The first ones I wrote for them were a series of thrillers. That's where I sort of fell in love with the thriller structure. I taught it for a very long time and certainly worked with a great many other writers who are writing thrillers. But it was in the process of writing those three thrillers for Orca book publishers, and those were all high low books, that I fell in love with it as a structure that I wanted to work with. That really start that's sort of planted the seed for me doing thrillers later. And I've just started doing that over the last couple of years.

Megan: I saw you speak yesterday, as part of the Federation of BC writers and you were talking about moving between genres. What do you enjoy so much about that? What is it that you enjoy about exploring different facets of fiction,

Gail: As I said, in in that discussion, I think as a writer, you want to remain challenged. And, again, I've been writing for well over 30 years now and I had been writing mostly literary works. I've been known for my literary works, but I really want to try something different. You know, I think anybody in any career hits that point where they just want to do something different. And I certainly did.

Like I said, I fell in love with the structure, the thriller structure, and wanted to play with that. So, it comes down to variety is just having new challenges, variety in the kinds of things we write, and I think that's really important. I know a lot of writers hesitate to do that because we get known for doing one thing and reader expectations can be high, that you continue to write that one thing, but just for our creative lives, we need to try new things. I've always tried to do different things. And I started out as a poet, and then I moved to short story, writing, and then move to the novel. In the meantime, I was a small-town newspaper reporter, and, you know, and it went on and on, right, so I've tried a great many things. I've always played with different structures within my literary stuff as well. In any given book, I would look to the thriller structure and romance, and we just talked about the save the cat structure, which is a screenplay structure, which a great many novelists use in, in the writing to help them map out their books. So, like I said, it's about play, you know, making writing play rather than work. I think

that's really important. In our creative lives, if we make it work, then, you know, our writing stalls. Yeah.

Megan: So, in *The Ride Home*, as we heard in your reading, it's mostly takes place aboard a school bus. What was it about a school bus that intrigued you as the primary setting for this story?

Gail: Well, you know, I was one of those kids on a rural school bus, and I spent just more than an hour a day on a bus, and my own kids spent well over an hour a day on a bus as a great many kids do. And it is a situation full of conflict.

As a writer we're always looking for situations where there's going to be the most conflict, and boy, I can tell you this, there's a lot of conflict on school buses. I remembered what that was like, and then of course, when my kids are going through that all those memories sort of tumbled back again. Those experiences of being on a bus where there were food fights, and when an older kid with a lighter was setting the seats on fire. There were kids making out of the back of the bus and throwing putting in yogurt and all kinds of awful things and then being the weird kid because I was the weird kid.

I was the quiet, smart kid, and trying to hide at the front of the bus with the kindergarten kids and that never worked. You're still a target of stuff. That bus ride home can be really painful for a lot of kids and especially if you're one of those kids that is maybe quiet and maybe easily overwhelmed by noise and all the rest of it. That bumpy rural bus ride home is hell. So that says it's a really good situation for a middle school book, you know, and that's why I settled on that as a situation.

Megan: I was gonna ask where the idea for the characters came from, but it sounds like many of these characters might have been on that school bus with you when you were a kid. [laughs]

Gail: [laughs] Well, for all the people listening that run that bus with me, no, it wasn't. [laughs] But you know, kids are kids, right? And there's always the quiet, smart kid. There's always the cool kid at the back and kids smoking in the back. Every generation has its own, I guess cliches. They're real people. In the end, that's part of what I wanted to get across with this book. At the start all these characters are cliches to the central protagonist. And as the bus ride continues, and as they have an accident, he figures out that there are a lot more than cliches are real people with real stories and that was something I want to, you know, to get across with this book.

Megan: I find when I chat with children's book authors who do picture books, sometimes there's that a teachable moment. And is that a challenge for you with writing high low books compared to, you know, thrillers don't necessarily have a teachable moment. But is that something you're thinking about when you're writing these high low books?

Gail: No, I think it's actually a mistake for writers to, to write towards a teachable moment or a message. I think that's a real mistake. Kids sniff that stuff out. I work with a lot of children's authors and that's the one message I work with them on is to avoid the message. Because what you want to do is write something that's entertaining, that kids can really relate to, and you want to offer enough in the way of conflict, that they're going to get their own message or their own meaning through it. You never want to plan to you never want to write towards that otherwise, you get an earnest book, and we don't want earnest stories. We want fun stories. We want to engage young readers and make it entertaining and make it meaningful for them. So yeah, I try to stay away from a message but, but that comes through any story on its own. So, if I can make it fun, if I can make it funny, if I can make an entertaining, then you know, a reader is going to find their own message and, in the story, it's something that comes from them.

Megan: Yeah. Where does the story comes from? Is that different for you for the high low books versus maybe your literary fiction? Or do they kind of all come from a similar seed pod?

Gail: Well, you know, I think I don't think we can hide who we are as authors. From a reader, our own interests, and our own personality and our own world view come through. I've often found that I'm repeating some of the themes and subject matter that I'm writing about in my larger projects within my smaller high-level books. So, you know, if I'm interested, for example, I'm writing one right now, that's a thriller, for adults, and it makes use of drones, because my husband is a drone pilot and uses them in his teaching of GIS. And so that interests me. I watched them fly all the time. They're really cool. They're fun to use. They're spooky as hell. They're menacing. So, I'm using that in my upcoming thriller for adults, not the one that's out this year, but one that's coming out soon. So that interests me enough that I want to use that in an upcoming high low book. The story will be very different but how I use that, that I'm using the drone crosses over into this other book. And I find that often happens that whatever I'm interested in with my literary projects, or bigger projects to take quite a long time to write will spill over into the smaller books that I do for young adults.

Megan: I'm curious about what it's been like for you with this book. Did it come out after the pandemic?

Gail: No, it was before the pandemic.

Megan: So, were you able to get some classroom time in before? Were you able to share the book with students?

Gail: No, no, no, no, it's been a very strange year. Events pretty much shut down and then of course, we started doing zoom events, but it's just not the same, right? You can only do so much with it. I think people have been very inventive in getting books out there. But I'm looking forward to face-to-face events that nothing replaces that and getting into the classrooms to talking to kids.

I also do a lot of events for adults with these high low books, which I really find really rewarding because a great many of them, it will often literally be the first novel they ever picked up. So, I'm hoping we can get back to that soon. I think we're all missing that content. And, you know and being in front of an audience and just engaging.

Megan: Yeah, I think it's interesting because with the audience for *The Ride Home*, it's kind of that age where I think Zoom events start to be a challenge. Little kids just find it exciting. I think I did an event with Monique Gray Smith last year, and they were all showing pictures and like we're just so jazzed about it, but maybe those middle grade readers are...

Gail: Yeah, I think that middle grade we've got to get on Discord forget Zoom. We want to be on Discord. Where's all my kids are all on Discord. So, I'm on Discord too. I think maybe we have to find ways to go where they are now rather than zoom. But like I say, I think I think we've been very inventive; I think we have to be even more inventive. But, but hopefully we'll be back in those classrooms within a year. I think fingers crossed.

Megan: Can you talk a little bit about the adult events you do with the high low books? I'm curious about that?

Gail: Well, I'll often get invitations from colleges, where they're teaching literacy classes, or literacy groups, libraries, where they have literacy groups and they'll just ask me to come in or these days, you know, do a zoom event. Very often, they'll have questions about how the book came together, and about the writing process. And they're vastly different groups. Some of the groups are people who have just really struggled in school, or they have been out of school for some time, and are improving their literacy skills, or other groups will be groups of immigrants, recent immigrants who are coming in, and they're improving their language skills. So, it can be a very diverse group of people who are just improving their literacy skills and coming from all kinds of different backgrounds. I find that really exciting I really enjoy those events a lot, and get a lot of feedback on the books, as well because very often, I won't recognize when a concept is more difficult to say, for somebody coming into the country, things that I take for granted about our Canadian culture, I should have done a better job of explaining it in a book, and I will just not even thought of it. Those events are always really eye opening for me as a writer, and I really, really enjoy them. Like I say, very often people will tell me that the book is the first one they've ever read. And it's got them involved in reading and that's just the best thing ever.

There's a lot of high low authors out there who are doing writing for both adults and for you know, kids, and well, I think they'll all say the same thing that it's just an amazing thing to have to have your book picked up by somebody and have them fall in love with writing with reading, and even try writing themselves. And that's an amazing thing.

Megan: Thanks so much to Gail for being on Writing the Coast. And thanks to you for listening and subscribing to the podcast.

If you would like to learn more about the BC and Yukon Book Prizes, be sure to visit our website bcyukonbookprizes.com.

On our website you'll find all the information about the shortlisted authors, as well as details about upcoming events like our Storied series, and the project BC Yukon Book Mail.

Next time on Writing the Coast, you'll hear my conversation with Junie Desil, whose book *eat salt / gaze at the ocean* is a finalist for the 2021 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize. Thanks for listening to Writing the Coast.