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Q & A with Josephine Cameron

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jun 26, 2023

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As owner and music educator at her Songwriting for Kids studio in Brunswick, Maine, Josephine Cameron takes her students through different musical genres and eras, teaching them how to play instruments, write songs, and embrace their creativity. When she's not teaching, singing, playing the piano, or writing songs and poems, Cameron

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writes novels about mermaids, heroes, and celebrity dogs. Her middle grade novels include *Maybe a Mermaid*, *A Dog Friendly Town*, *Not All Heroes*, and her

newest, The Department of Lost Dogs (out now from FSG). PW spoke with Cameron about how her teaching and writing fuel each other, why she's fascinated with famous dogs, and what her hopes are for her readers and students.

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You're the first music teacher we've spoken with for *PW's* School and Library Spotlight! How and why do you teach music and the creative process?

For the last 15 years, I've taught music privately at my piano and guitar studio. I teach K–8 kids and mostly focus on piano as well as improvisation and songwriting. I absolutely love helping kids develop a creative habit. I try to introduce them to the creative life—and the moments when we can actively practice using the innovative, imaginative part of our brains.

When teaching and learning music, especially piano, you have an opportunity to interact and use your problem-solving skills. Each time my students come into my studio, they're presented with a piece of music that seems absolutely impossible. But then we take it apart and attack it one small piece at a time. With piano everything is very linear—the notes and keys are laid out in a row. It's also multi-sensory. You can feel the distance between the notes and have multiple ways of approaching the music. So, together, we're reading the music and finding our way through it. And, just like that, we're developing the creative habit, problem-solving skills, accessing our curiosity and wonder, and improvising, too. I think all of these skills are so important, and we need them in the world right now.

What are a few of your favorite things about teaching this way? What are some of the challenges?

One of my favorite things is that we always have studio projects that students are working on together, and collaborative group lessons every quarter. The older kids sometimes will help the younger kids. They share their knowledge and help them learn. This gives the older kids some confidence. And the younger kids have someone to look up to, and a goal to work towards. It can also go in the opposite direction, too: the older kids are so happy to learn from the younger kids, and the younger kids are happy to show what they know. They have much more in common than you would think. They can relate with each other in terms of their tastes in music and sense of humor. I believe it's helpful to have these multi-generational interactions in the studio—and beyond.

The biggest challenge is teaching patience. "There are always a couple of kids who take to things immediately, but that's rare. Then there are the others who are afraid to try something for fear it might sound horrible—and be a failure. Like many artists, you might have something in your head, and then, when you put it out into the world, it's not what you imagined, and that can be really scary. I teach them that they can go back to that phrase and develop it a little bit more, and try it another way. Then, hopefully, they'll become more comfortable with trying things, and know that they can use what they learn to create something beautiful!

When did you start creating stories and decide to write for kids?

When I was around seven years old, I asked my parents if I could have a writing desk. We received some hand-me-downs, and my mom painted the desk yellow and the chair pink. It was where I sat and wrote all of my stories. I also illustrated, stapled them together, and gave them out as gifts to my five siblings. One was a comedy about an older sister who came home from college but didn't want to hang out with her little sister. At the time, I thought they were pure fiction. But now I look back at the stories and see that each one had a little reality in it.



I started college as a music major, but ended up an English major. I always played piano and guitar and sang, but writing was my first passion. I started teaching music lessons so I could have my mornings to write. When I decided to get my MFA in creative writing, I tried writing adult fiction but all of my main characters were always between 11 and 12 years old. That was the voice that I was drawn to. So, I started writing for middle grade kids, and it clicked.



It was 10 years until you published your first novel, and now you have four novels. Can you tell us about your latest book? Where did it come from?

Writing and publishing is a game of patience. What kept me—and still keeps me—going was the love of the work: thinking up stories, writing, and creating books. The craft of writing is like a puzzle; it's all about problem solving. It's the same thing that I try to teach my music students regarding the importance of curiosity and the creative habit.

My fourth novel is called *The Department of Lost Dogs*. It's a stand-alone mystery that's set in the same town as my novel *Dog Friendly Town*. The idea came from my husband's aunt and uncle. We had been on a trip to visit family in California, and we stopped in Carmel, which was at the time named "Dog Town USA" because it's such a dog-friendly place. I thought it would be fun to write a story set there.

How do you think teaching music fuels and feeds your writing—and vice versa?

I feel my music and writing work together. Teaching allows me to get out of my own head and into the music. It also allows me to see what K–8 kids are interested in. But, mostly, my teaching gives me new ways to think about creating things that are beautiful and interesting in the world of music and literature.

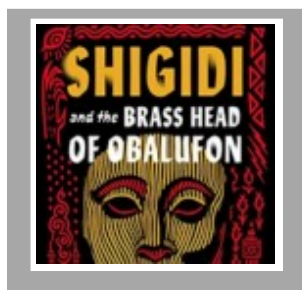
Just like I encourage my students, I'm following my curiosity and experimenting. When I'm writing, I experience the same kind of things my kids do when they are improvising. I have this spark of an idea, and I go down all kinds of wrong paths until I find the right one. This allows me to help my music students bring that into their own creative world. Then, it's their energy and enthusiasm that feeds my energy and enthusiasm to go back to my writing. It's a cycle that keeps everything going and flowing.

What are your hopes for your readers and musical students?

My latest novel has a school, Sunny Day Academy, with a motto: "Follow your curiosity!" It's my hope that readers will find their own sparks of curiosity and follow them down whatever paths they want. I also hope that the story will help them maintain a sense of wonder, excitement, and interest in the world around them.

As for my musical students, I hope to send them off with social-emotional, creative-thinking, and problem-solving skills to help them through whatever they're going to do next. Whatever they choose: whether it's running the next big technology company or becoming a concert pianist or professional musician. For me it's all about process, creativity, and living a creative life.

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