

LitTea Episode 6: Jennifer March Soloway

Hosted By Sabrina Lotfi

- Sabrina** Hi everyone! Welcome back to LitTea! I'm your host, Sabrina Lotfi, and our Episode 6 special guest is Jennifer March Soloway, a literary agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency. A quick note before we dive in: Jennifer has done a lot of amazing interviews before ours, where she talks about how she got into agenting and gives other incredible querying advice, so I'll list those in the Show Notes for anyone who wants to check them out too.
- Sabrina** Hi.
- Jennifer** Hello.
- Sabrina** So, first question, what book made you a reader?
- Yeah, what a hard question. I mean, there were so many books when I was a kid that I really loved. I was a big Judy Blume fan. I really loved the problem novels. I loved *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. I loved *A Wrinkle in Time*, which is not Judy Blume, but Madeleine L'Engle. I loved - but Judy Blume. I read *Deenie*. I read *Forever*. I read *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, which I already mentioned. I don't know. I read far and wide. I read *Dragonwings* by Lawrence Yep. I just read everything I could get my hands on, frankly. And, I read up. I read a lot of - I even read adult books when I was a young kid that I shouldn't have read at that age. I went to the library, and I read a lot. I don't know if there is one book that really stands out to me. I mean, I loved *The House With The Clock In Its Walls* by John Bellairs. I have many favorites. It's just so hard to choose.
- Sabrina** So, you've just been in love with reading and books your entire life, basically.
- Jennifer** Yeah, I really loved stories. Yeah, I loved stories - and I loved - and I also loved writing. I wrote my first book when I was, I think, in fourth grade or fifth grade.
- Sabrina** Oh, wow.
- Jennifer** Yeah, but that's not something I'm doing now. I'm really enjoying agenting, but I just love - I love craft, I love writing, I love storytelling.
- Sabrina** I was gonna ask about that because you have an MFA, as well. I was gonna ask you about writing, but you're happy in the agent lane?

- Jennifer** I really love agenting. In fact, when I first became an agent, some friends of mine from grad school asked me about it, and they said, 'Well, that makes complete sense.' And, I said 'What are you talking about?' And, they said, 'Well, we had had this class where we had read a book, and we were supposed to write a literary paper about it doing analysis.' But, I essentially wrote an editorial letter for the book, because I didn't like the way it ended. And so, I plotted it all out and explained in my essay, in my paper for this class, why I felt like the ending wasn't gratifying, but it could have been. And, here's the way all the clues could have lined up in order to get that gratifying ending. When my friend reminded me of that paper, I was like, 'Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. That's true.' Yeah. In that same class too, I wrote a pitch for a book, too. So, I was already doing it before I meant to do it.
- Sabrina** So, you were already ready to start agenting before you started agenting. I love this!
- Jennifer** Yeah, but I didn't realize it. It took me, like, everything I learned the hard way, and I have to make a lot of mistakes, and I bumble along until I figure out like, 'Oh, actually, this is perfect for me.'
- Sabrina** Nice. I'm kind of jumping ahead, but do you work on pitches with your authors before you go on sub, too? Is that one of the things you like to do?
- Jennifer** Yes! That's a great question. So, if my client has written a great pitch and I love it, I'm not gonna recreate the wheel. We'll use it. In fact, I just went out with a book where I loved their pitch, loved it, and thought, 'This doesn't need anything.' But, I've had other clients where maybe they are struggling with a pitch, or I will write the pitch. But, then we collaborate together, and usually it's a combination of both. Like, they'll send me an early pitch and then I will rework it. And, then, one of the things I love to do is share my reworked pitch with them, and then we hash it out together. Because my goal is to just have it be the most exciting and enticing pitch it can be. And so, it can be really fun to just, like, talk it through together. And, in fact, I had one situation where I sent it to a client - and I was kind of pitching something in a certain way, and I figured that my client might not necessarily love how I did it. And so, they were like, 'Oh, I don't know about that.' And, I was like, 'Okay.' And, basically I just started popping up. 'Well, what if we said it this way? What if we said it this way?' We were actually on Zoom, and I was just in the chat, like, throwing out a revised sentence, 'Well, we could do it this way, we could do it that way.' And, then we came up with the way we wanted to do it, so it was really fun.
- Sabrina** Oh, that sounds super fun.
- Jennifer** Yeah! And, I have a background in marketing, so I am totally fine with throwing out a million ideas and having someone say 'No. Yes. No. Yes.' Because the truth is, and this is true in every walk of life, no one knows what they want until they see it, and they definitely know what they don't want when they see it. And so, the trick is to just keep trying until you get to that, what they do want.
- Sabrina** Yeah, look at those million nos to get to that yes. I love that! Actually, that made me think of something else. Are pitches to editors, are they pretty similar to a query letter?

Jennifer Yeah. In some ways. I would say what I use for a pitch for an editor will be fairly similar to what would work in a pitch letter. For the novel, they're going to have, like, one or two paragraphs, maybe three, that is raising questions in the reader's mind. And, it's essentially like, flap copy, right? It's the enticing paragraph or two that are gonna really make you want to read this book. And, then, the other thing that I will include, that actually I think you should include in a query letter as well, is the positioning statement. And, that would be like 'My book takes the X from this book - the comp - the recent book that's been published in the last three years, that's similar in vein. You know, it could be the lush writing, or the incredible world building, or the heart pounding thriller, or the heart pounding suspense, or whatever it is, meets these elements from this other book, and will appeal to these readers, and why. And, usually in that positioning statement, or one or two state - uh - sentences, you'll also talk about, these are the themes that this book is gonna delve into and explore. And, this is kind of what readers will take away from this book, we hope.

Sabrina Okay. I like that a lot. And, that - actually you're right. I don't see people including themes a lot.

Jennifer Yeah, I think I'm gonna give you an example from a book that I - that was published, and I'm gonna read the positioning statement for it. So, this is for a book called Private Lessons by Cynthia Salaysay. And, it is about a girl who is an elite - she's a really wonderful piano player, classical pianist, and she gets the opportunity to study with this elite piano teacher. And, they have - he's a demanding teacher, and he demands excellence of her. And, she's doing it because the college counselor told her if she competes, and starts competing in piano recitals, she could possibly go on and use it for college applications. I'm doing a terrible job of pitching that book right now.

Sabrina You're really not, actually. [Both laugh.]

Jennifer Okay. It's a really beautiful book. And, the protagonist is - her father has died. Her mother is a single mother. They don't have a lot of money, and it means everything for her to go and take these piano lessons. She lives in the East Bay, in Northern California, in the San Francisco Bay Area, and she ends up taking public transportation into the city, into San Francisco, to take lessons. It's like a really big deal for her, and she wants to please him no matter what. And, then she - So, here's how we positioned this. This is the positioning statement, actually, I'll just read the whole pitch. "After 17-year-old Claire Alalay's father dies, only music seems to help. Claire likes herself best when she plays his old piano, a welcome escape from the sadness and her traditional Filipino mother's prayer groups. And her guidance counselor says her playing could lead to a scholarship. After winning a local competition, Paul Avon, a prominent piano teacher, agrees to teach her lessons. Soon, Claire loses herself in Paul's world, and his way of looking at Chopin, Beethoven and love. Her efforts are rewarded, but no matter how much she practices, or how many competitions she wins, Paul continues to demand more. Desperate for his affirmation, Claire becomes willing to do whatever it takes to gain his praise and love. Set in the competitive" - and, this is the positioning statement - "Set in the competitive world of Sara Zarr's *The Lucy Variations*, with the taboo intimacy of Jessica Alcott's *Even When You Lie to Me*, this poignant debut explores how easy it is to confuse selfworth with love, sex with success, and how difficult it is to find one's voice in a world that rates it third or fourth."

Sabrina Okay, I like that. Okay. Yes. Positioning sentence.

- Jennifer** Yeah. So, if you can tell me what's this book about, what are gonna be the themes, and what's it's gonna make me feel. And, if you can tell me what elements of other books that are in the same category - that are gonna work with your book - that's very, very helpful. And, I'm looking for books that have been recently published in the last three years. You don't want to comp something like *Children of Blood and Bone*, which was a humongous bestseller, but you want to get something that's gonna have really strong sales and that's possibly attainable, so that your book will reach the same readers that liked that book.
- Sabrina** Okay, that makes perfect sense. We went so off topic. Okay. Was there a particular book that made you want to become an agent?
- Jennifer** Huh! I don't know. What made me want to become an agent was that I got the opportunity to work for Laura Rennert, who's Executive Agent at our agency. And, she is incredible and amazing, and she's gotten this fabulous list, and just everything that - her approach to editorial, to agenting, to championing writers, just resonated with me over and over again. And, I really wanted to work with her, and I wanted to do it for myself with my own clients. I really love to lift up writers. I love to be able to say, 'You're gonna get published.' It just feels so great. And, I especially love working with people editorially, and helping them find their stories.
- Sabrina** That's really interesting. So, when you started working with Laura, did you know - before you started working with her - that you were gonna pursue agenting, or was it only after?
- Jennifer** I hate to admit this, but I wasn't sure.
- Sabrina** Oh, my gosh.
- Jennifer** I've never been sure about anything in my life, I don't think -
- Sabrina** That's fair. There are so many things out there. I mean...
- Jennifer** Yeah. I mean, I was really interested in it, really intrigued, but I didn't like - it felt like there's some kids are like, 'I know I'm gonna be a lawyer someday, or I know I'm gonna be a teacher.' I wasn't that kid. I never knew. I was always trying to find myself and agenting like, I just felt like suddenly I felt like I found my people, and I found my world, and I found something that really pulls all of my strengths together in a good way.
- Sabrina** Awesome! Oh, I love to hear that. That's so great. Okay, so you were basically a toy agent before you got into agenting books?
- Jennifer** I was not a toy agent. What I was is that I worked at a toy company, and I was actually in the marketing department and did communications and public relations and marketing. But, one of my jobs there was that I met with toy inventors and they would pitch me their ideas, and then I would turn around and pitch them internally in house. So, we called it the Toy Inventor Liaison. But, yeah, I just would meet with toy inventors and see what they had, because our company had a really strong internal design team, and we did almost all of our concepts in house, but we were always looking for new technology or new ideas that might be really cool. And so, I met with toy inventors and I would pitch things internally.
- Sabrina** That's cool. Can you share any of the toys that you helped bring into the world?

Jennifer There was one called Waterball, but it didn't last very long. Basically, I met an engineer who had figured out how - he had been working for more than a decade on this - of how to get a water launcher that would lob a ball of water through the air, so that water would still look like a ball, as it was flinging through the air.

Sabrina But, not like in a water balloon or anything?

Jennifer No. Just the water in a ball.

Sabrina Oh, that's cool.

Jennifer Instead of just splashing everywhere.

Sabrina Oh, that's really cool.

Jennifer I don't understand the physics. It was mind blowing.

Sabrina That's awesome. I want one. [Laughs]

Jennifer They don't make it anymore, but it was a really cool toy.

Sabrina Nice. Would you like to share some hobbies or interests that you have that are outside of, like, reading and agenting?

Jennifer Sure. I'm a runner. I run five days a week. I ride my bicycle all over San Francisco, up and down the hills. That's my mode of transportation. My orange bicycle. It is not a road bike. It is a seven speed Dutch bike. And so, if you're in San Francisco, you might see me riding my bike and...

Sabrina And wave at Jennifer! That's awesome.

Jennifer I really love movies, and I go see a lot of movies and especially into horror movies right now. I was just talking to a client about some movies that I had just seen. I just saw "Smile" in the theater. That's the most recent. What else? Yeah, I lift weights...

Sabrina Very athletic and into exercise.

Jennifer Yeah. I like to walk a lot, too. I walk all over the city. I feel very lucky to live here...

Sabrina And, it's lovely to be out in nature like that, too.

Jennifer Yeah, I'm really lucky to be close to the water and with great parks.

Sabrina Awesome. You want to get into some agenting questions? So, we kind of talked about this a little bit, and I initially was gonna ask you how many clients you have, but we were talking about how it kind of fluctuates and that what we really need to focus on here is how do you handle the clients that you have, and how do you decide when you can bring on new ones?

Jennifer Yeah, that's a great question. So, the answer to how many clients do I have is more like how many clients can I handle? And, it's always changing. So, when I first became an agent, I didn't have as many clients because I was still kind of getting my footing and trying to figure out what I'm doing. And I will also say that the thing about agenting and publishing is that it's always changing. It's like having kids. You have one kid and like, 'Okay, I figured it out.' And, then you have another kid and you're like, 'Wait a second! You're totally different.' And, that's true of clients. That's true of books. That's true of...there's just a lot to kind of track. Also, the editors are always moving around. This is an industry where they don't always promote from within. So, you gotta step out to step up. And so, you might have somebody that you have really connected with at Random House, and then all of sudden, they're at HarperCollins, or vice versa. So, there's just a lot to track. But in terms of how much can I do, and when do I feel like I've got room, the question is, it depends. I look at my list sort of like a portfolio. Sometimes I've got you know, some clients can be really prolific and be writing a lot, and then they might stop for a bit and take a break. And, then I've got others who might not write at all, but then suddenly come out with a novel. So, I'm always having to sort of balance to make sure that I can deliver the value that I want to, and be available to my clients, and honor everybody's needs. So, it's always a tricky balance, and I wish I had a perfect answer for you, but I don't. When I feel like I have more space is, for example, sometimes I'll have a bunch of books and then I'll sell them and I'll realize, 'Oh, I don't have anything more to go out with submission. Maybe I need to take on someone else.' And, then the other thing is, sometimes I'll see something that I just have to work on it. I can't say no, I will figure out how to take them on, because I love the book so much. The other thing will be sometimes I will be so, so busy that even though the best thing ever just came into my box, I'm just not in a place where I can take it on right now, because I've got too much else going on, and I have to honor the people I'm already working with.

Sabrina They're your clients. That's exactly what you should be doing. They are your clients.

Jennifer They are my clients, yeah, exactly.

Sabrina So, obviously, when you're talking to your clients, you talk to them about when they're on submission and stuff, and you're obviously giving them feedback on their work if you're working on a book together. But, what else do you communicate with your clients about, outside of those things? Do you ever, or...

Jennifer You mean, do I just stop talking to them? [Both laugh.] I'm just kidding. Well, I will talk to them about what are their goals, and also what's going on in their personal life. How can we best balance their workload, how can we best strategize for them? Sometimes my clients want to brainstorm ideas for their next project. That can be really great. If someone is under contract already, we've sold the book, but maybe they need some help with their schedule, or they need an extension, or maybe someone they haven't received notes and they need notes. Or, maybe we're gonna look into film and TV, and we're gonna try and get them a film agent. There's a lot of reasons why I talk to my clients. But, sometimes my clients need time to just go and write and don't need me, and don't need to be distracted by me. So, we might not talk as much. Certainly over the pandemic, for example, a lot of people seemed to really take a step back and not write. Like it was very hard. It was a difficult time, and for some people, they just couldn't write. So, it was about giving them grace and space. For others, they wrote a lot and had a lot, and I was in contact a lot, because I was doing editorial for them and responding to them and answering questions. So, I try to be very accessible to my clients. I have a lot of author friends who are afraid to talk to their agents. I never want that. I want people to come with me with their questions. I mean, I don't want them to over abuse that. But if there's something going on, I want to know, and I want to be able to talk about it. And, I try to make myself available. I try to get back to my clients within 24 business hours. And, that means if you get to me Friday, I'll try and get back to you Monday. And, I also tell them, if you haven't heard from me, it's not that I don't want to get back to you. It means either I missed it somehow, or I'm in the middle of an auction. But, you're a priority to me, and I want you to know that, and I will get back to you. And, nudge me. I will come back to you.

Sabrina Okay, cool. That's interesting. You kind of laughed about disappearing, but, I mean, some agents don't communicate a lot with their clients.

Jennifer Yeah, well, and I think that if your agent's disappeared and you're worried, then reach out to them and talk to them. I have a lot of people come to me at conferences, and they say, 'my agent doesn't talk to me.' And, I was like, 'Well, have you talked to your agent?', and they were like, 'Well, no.' And, that was like, 'Well, then why wouldn't you try to give them a chance and tell them that you want to talk? They're working for you.' So, that's what I mean. Like, if you've got an issue but at the same point, I'm like, I've got some clients who haven't - I haven't talked to them in a while, but they've told me that they're fine. They're working. They don't need me at this moment, or I don't think that they do. And, I would hope and if any of you are listening right now and you think, 'Why hasn't Jennifer gotten back to me? Why isn't she talking to me?' Like, reach out and let me know, and I encourage everyone else - take responsibility and reach out and say, 'I'd like to talk,' because then of course we will.

Sabrina Yes, that's great advice. Okay. Do you want to talk about contracts a little bit? Because those are so mysterious. What are some really interesting things that get negotiated that not a lot of people know are in a contract? Maybe some things that when your clients look at them for the first time, they're like, 'Oh, wow, we're talking about this already.'

Jennifer Well, I think the biggest thing for authors to really think about is a Competitive Works Clause, which is what are you able to write when you're under contract for a book? So, what else can you write, and what else can you publish? So, you want to be able to make sure that you can work on the book and publish the book that you're working on. But, for example, if you're working on a young adult novel, are you allowed to write another young adult novel for another imprint, or do you have to stay only for - do you need to only work with your one contract? So, that's something to think about. Another thing to think about is an Option Clause. So, do they get the first look, the first writer refusal on your next book? Any book? Or, is it the next book in the category? Is it the next fantasy in the category? And, you want to narrow that as much as possible, because you want to be able to have the flexibility to publish wherever you want to publish. Does that make sense?

Sabrina Yeah. I was about to ask you what's most beneficial to the client.

Jennifer Yeah. I mean, I think the best thing for a client is to be able to have the flexibility to have a lot of different options, and not be beholden to one entity only.

Sabrina When you get an Option Clause like that, does that mean that you go to them first, and then if they don't want it, you can branch out with it, or can you only...

Jennifer Yes. Yes. But, sometimes there's a window of opportunity. Sometimes a publisher will - initially - I mean, we try to negotiate this on behalf of our clients - but I've seen some contracts where it's the next, you know, it's the next young adult novel or it's the next children's book.

Sabrina Oh, that's a broad one. Okay.

Jennifer Yeah. And, you're not allowed to share it with anyone else. And, they have up until, like, six months after publication to say no to it, which really holds you back.

Sabrina After publication. Yeah, that's a long time out.

Jennifer Yeah. But I think a lot of authors think, like, 'Oh, they want me, and then they want my next thing,' and that's a good thing. So, it's nice to be wanted. So, I think a lot of authors are like, 'Okay, I'll be happy to do that.' The other thing that I also try to negotiate for my clients is that if the publisher is late with notes, that the client will get more time as well to work on their project. So, if you're waiting for notes, then you get the time that you waited attached to your deadline.

Sabrina That makes sense. Your deadline doesn't shrink because they were too late.

Jennifer Right. And, everybody is late. I mean, it's understandable. I'm late sometimes. I'm sure you're late. We're all late.

Sabrina Oh, I've definitely been late a time or two.

Jennifer But then, can we have a time for time extension?

Sabrina That's fair. Are royalty rates pretty standard?

Jennifer No, not necessarily. Yeah, I negotiate royalty rates. I try to get the best rates for my clients.

Sabrina Okay, cool.

Jennifer Yeah, that's something that we always negotiate. We negotiate advance, we negotiate royalties. We negotiate options, author copies, subwrites, we negotiate... Oh, my gosh, I'm just so tired today. [Laughs.]

Sabrina There's so much stuff in contracts. How long are they? Typically?

Jennifer It all depends. Anywhere from 15 to 30 pages, or more.

Sabrina Wow, that's like, probably longer than some of the books, if you've got a picture book. That's incredible.

Jennifer Yeah, maybe. Yeah.

Sabrina What do you spend the most time on? Typically?

Jennifer I don't know. Like I said, it's always changing. Sometimes it will be a lot of editorial work. Earlier in the year, I did a lot of editorial work because I was preparing projects to go on submission. Then, I might spend a lot of time on getting things on submission, and I might spend a lot of time on nudging people. If I'm so fortunate to sell deals, I might be spending a lot of time on negotiating. I might be doing a lot of time on contracts. I mean, this job is never the same day. I never have the same day. In fact, on Fridays, I always think, like, 'This is gonna be my quiet reading day,' and then it isn't. Or, I might be talking to a client who is concerned about something. Or, there's just so many different things that I could be doing. I might be going to a conference, so I might be working on a talk or doing critiques. There's so much. I might be talking to a film agent or like -

Sabrina An auction. You mentioned an auction earlier.

Jennifer I might be having an auction. Yeah. I would love to have more of those.

Sabrina How long do those usually take?

Jennifer Again, that just all depends on the auction. It depends on how many people are interested, how many people are participating. So, usually an auction is where you have three interested parties, or more. And so, if you have three people, it's gonna be one - you have three editors interested, that's gonna be one kind of auction. If you've got seven or ten, it's gonna be another kind of auction.

Sabrina Sounds really big and intense. Like a lot of juggling on your end.

Jennifer It's just a lot of people to talk to. It's a lot to coordinate.

Sabrina Yeah. Okay, cool. So, probably if they have more people involved, they're gonna take a little bit longer to figure out.

Jennifer Yeah, so just emailing everybody, right? Yeah, I spend a lot of time - you know what? That's what I do the most. I email, email, email. All I do is email.

Sabrina That's fair. With multiple clients, multiple editors to talk to, multiple film agents to talk to. Yeah, you're probably just emailing all the time.

Jennifer Yeah, I also do a lot of networking. Like, I talk to a lot of editors. ‘What are you looking for? What are you interested in? What do you have too much of? What's that one thing you've always wanted to find that you've never found before? What categories are working right now? What are you seeing a lot of that you have too much of?’ Yeah, so I do a lot of networking that way too.

Sabrina Okay, cool. It seems like in this last year things have really slowed down as far as responses from agents, and like a lot of agents being closed. And, I was just wondering if you wanted to talk to us about some of the behind the scene things that affect that and that kind of thing. I know that's kind of a big question, but...

Jennifer Yeah, no, that's fine. I am gonna pull up my query manager right now as I'm talking to you, and I'm gonna tell you exactly how many queries are in my box right now.

Sabrina Oh my gosh. Okay. I love this.

Jennifer And so, I have been slow. So, I closed the summer because it was a lot for me. Like I said, the Pandemic did one of two things for people. Either they - sorry, my query manager is going really slowly right now - either they wrote a ton, or they wrote nothing at all. But, there were a lot of people who wrote a ton. And, I've gotten more queries than ever before this year. And so, in September... So, I closed June, July, August, just to catch up. And, I was almost caught up, but I still had a few in my box that I needed to read. And so, I apologize to everyone. I am really slow. But just to give you a sense, today is October 14th. I have received 330 queries for the month of October so far. It's the 14th, and I have received 330 queries in October. In September, I received 713 queries.

Sabrina That's a lot.

Jennifer So, that is more than 20 queries a day. And, if I'm getting mostly novels, that's ten pages, plus a letter. So, that's eleven pages per query. And then, on top of that, if I like something and I want to read it, then that takes me even more time. So, I have been really slow. And, the thing is, I'll like something and I'll request it, but then I still have the influx of all the others coming in. And so, what I end up doing is I'm trying to constantly read and respond to people and try and get back to them. Where I get really slow is the submissions, because I really want to take some quality time and read it and be able to give some thought to it, especially if I'm gonna like it. And so, that's where I get really slow. And sometimes, I'll think to myself, ‘Oh, I'm too tired tonight. I'm not gonna be able to really give this my qualified attention.’ And, maybe I won't like it because of that, and that's not fair to the writer. So, I need to read it when I am ready. And sometimes I don't feel that way very often after a long day. So, it's just hard, and I feel so bad.

Sabrina You want to be in the right headspace, though. You really do, especially depending on the book, you really need to be able to immerse yourself in it.

Jennifer Yeah, and I also, I feel so honored that people send me their work, and I feel it's such a privilege to be able to read things and consider it. And so, I try to really think about, am I the right person? Am I gonna be? Do I have a vision for this book? Am I gonna be able to sell it for this person? Will I be able to position it in such a way and launch it into the world in a way that will be successful? And, sometimes the answer is yes, and sometimes the answer is no. But it's hard for me, it's hard for me to make those decisions.

Sabrina Well, it sounds like there's a lot that you have to think about for each one of those, too.

Jennifer Yeah, but it's something I constantly struggle with and try to figure out how to best manage my queries and submissions. But, I read everything myself.

Sabrina Okay, so you don't have an assistant go through them first.

Jennifer Right now I don't have an assistant. It's me. Which makes me even slower.

Sabrina Are you thinking about getting one?

Jennifer At some point I will. I had one for a little bit earlier this year and it was great. And, I might get an assistant again. But even when I had my assistant, if I'm really interested in the book, I read it all the way. This is how I read. When I think I'm gonna offer on something, I will get out my notebook and I will start taking notes. And, if I take a lot of notes, then I will write my notes as if I'm going to write an editorial letter. And, my goal is - this is for a novel, of course - my goal is that once I finish that book and once I finish the manuscript, I have 30 pages of notes and I am ready to write an editorial letter for when I talk to that - to the prospective client. When I get on the phone with them and I can share my vision and I can tell them why I think I'm gonna be a value add for them. And, if they choose me, I will have that letter to them in a week.

Sabrina Okay - that's... Okay. You write long editorial letters. I love that.

Jennifer I write long editorial letters. Yeah, I do. And, if I read something and I'm not taking notes like that, then it's probably not the right book for me. And, that's what I'm discovering about my process. And sometimes even like - sometimes I'll take notes up to like 100 pages of a manuscript, and then realize I just don't know if I'm the right person to help this person get to the next level. And, the thing is that you want the right partner for you. You want someone that you can communicate with. You want to work with someone who understands your work, where you've got really good editorial synergy, where you feel empowered to revise, you feel empowered to take your story to the next level, and that they help you figure out how to do that, in whatever form. Or, maybe you don't want someone who's editorial. Maybe you've got a really good critique group and really good beta readers and you just need your agent to get out there and sell it. So, in that case you want to find someone who's really good at positioning, who's well networked, who can get it out there. And, maybe an agent like that is gonna have more clients because they're not doing editorial, it's not gonna slow them down as much. That's why the question of how many clients do you have is never quite the right answer. It's more, how are you and I gonna work together? How are you gonna support me and help me achieve my goals?

Sabrina That made me - you were talking about taking a ton of notes and that if you don't have a lot of notes that they're probably not the right fit for you...

Jennifer Or, it's just awesome and I'm ready to sell it.

Sabrina That too. That's always a good one, too. How do you determine when it's more of a revise and resubmit situation? Do you ever ask for those?

Jennifer Yes, I do. I do. And, I used to ask for them a lot more, and now I'm starting to rethink that.

Sabrina Oh, interesting.

Jennifer Yeah, well, I know. I mean, I still do a lot of revise and resubmits, for sure. The thing is that for me, unless it's something I would never do or something, or I feel like it's not really the right fit for me, I really believe in the power of revision, And someone might send me ten pages right now and, like, 'I don't know, it's okay.' But then, they might revise it. It might come back and just be stunning, and it might be something exactly what I want to work on. So, I often say all of my notes basically say, if it feels like it's right, it could be a fit for my list. I'll say 'I didn't connect with these opening pages, but with me, no means not yet. Try me again in six months. If you keep working on it, you might make it dynamite and I might have to work with you.'

Sabrina Okay. Yeah. I love - revisions are amazing. It's so incredible. Even just like, my friends' books, and stuff. Like reading their early, and then reading their later, and then when you see them on the shelves, the difference between what they did with both their agents and their editors afterwards is just so incredible.

Jennifer Yeah, I think so. What I used to do is I used to actually write full editorial letters for people that were in my box that I saw a lot of potential but felt it wasn't ready yet. And, that's something I don't do anymore. It's something I did early in my career. But, I don't think that's the right approach anymore. I might get on the phone with someone and give them some notes, or I might send some light notes, but I don't have the time to, like, do developmental edits anymore.

Sabrina Okay, yeah, that makes sense.

Jennifer Even with my clients, I think that I have three good rounds in me, and if you use me as a developmental editor, then I'm not gonna be able to help you get it ready for submission. I always say, like, I'm an asset and use me in the way that you need me, but if you use me too early, I'm not gonna be able to help you toward the end, and I think I might be more valuable toward the end. Like, use your critique groups in the beginning on the developmental part of it, and then I can come in and really help you take it to the next level, I hope. And, if not, then I'm not the right person for you. And, also, if somebody ever gets notes from me and they're like they don't like them, then I'm really not the right person for you. You should run. I'm not the right person.

Sabrina That's fair. That's fair. Yes. If you don't agree with the notes, then not a good fit.

Jennifer Or, if you don't like my delivery. And, I would say that's true of anyone. You want to work with someone that makes you - that you feel good about. That's a really good working relationship, because hopefully you're gonna be together with your agent for a while. That's what I want. I don't like to break up with people.

Sabrina No, it's really not fun. What goes into - I don't even know if this is a thing that happens - but editing illustrations, does that happen?

Jennifer It definitely does. I mean, there are some people who've got wonderful art backgrounds and can talk about composition and lighting and color and all that line art and stuff. I don't have that background, and I'm very upfront with that with my clients. What I do feel like I have the strength is story. And so, especially if we're working on a picture book together and it's an author/illustrator, I might say, I wonder if an image that has something like this story conveying this piece of story would be good. I wonder if we can see this character here, or maybe this expression on this character, or something like that. But then I'll leave it for them. But in terms of editing their artwork, I would hope that my clients find somewhere else to get that kind of help. I'm more of like story for them. Yeah. I'm not an artist. I don't pretend to be. But what I do think I'm good at is story and working on, you know, and working on story with them. And also, working with illustrators can be a lot of project management, too. Like, okay, how many projects can I work on? What should the schedule be like? And, then if I'm already booked, then how far in advance can we book? That kind of thing?

Sabrina Okay. And, in one of your other interviews, you had mentioned that when you do get an author/illustrator, you like to see if they are interested in doing illustrations for their projects sometimes. If they are, how do you set those kind of things in motion?

Jennifer Yeah. So, anytime I work with an author/illustrator or even just an illustrator, most people I know either they're artists first and then a writer second, or maybe they're both. But I will ask what their goals are. Do they want to illustrate other people's texts? Do they only want to illustrate their own writing? And, for many people who are author/illustrators, I think it's great to do both. Because, if you are working on your own work, but you illustrate someone else's text, you're gonna learn about story from illustrating their text. And, they might be funnier than you, or they might be sweeter than you, or more heartfelt. They might be writing in a different direction, but you'll learn from the page turn, and how they work with cadence, and story development, and characterization. You'll learn from those stories. Like, for a great example is Jocelyn Li Langrand. Her first book that she did on her own is called *If You Miss Me*. And, it is a beautiful, heartfelt story. It's sad. I cried. It's beautiful. It's filled with hope. It's very sweet. And, then she got the opportunity to illustrate Richard Ho's *Year of the Cat*, which is funny and ironic and hilarious. And, Jocelyn learned a lot about humor from Richard, and working with his story and his words, and she just loved it. It was a marvelous experience she'll be able to carry with her forth into future projects. So, that's why I say that. Now, in terms of pitching illustrators to work on other projects, like I said, I talk to a lot of editors and I'll say, 'Are you looking for anybody? For any artists? What kind of art are you looking for? Is there a way I can help you?' Our agency does some *Illustrator Blasts*, where we send out emails to all sorts of illustrators sorry, editors and art directors once a week promoting one of our illustrators. We do a lookbook which is on our website, which is like a catalog of some of our artists, and then we have artist portfolios on our website. So, we promote in lots of different ways.

Sabrina Okay, cool. That's really interesting. I love what you were saying about how she learned from working on the other project in illustration. She learned about humor and stuff. You always see - this is kind of a tangent - but you always see people talking about reading within your category, but that reminds me how important it is to read outside of your category, too.

Jennifer Yeah, I would say for everyone just to read as much as you can and try to read really good writing, and think about craft. And, even when you're writing, think about your craft. Like, even when you're writing an email, like, what is your word choice, what's your syntax, what's your diction? How are you framing it? I think those are always an opportunity. But, yeah, read as much as you can in every possible category. Yeah. But also read very well in your own category. Know what's working, know what's selling, and know what doesn't work so well. And, think about yourself, why? Why does this work? And, why did something not work?

- Sabrina** That's a good one, too. You do. You spend a lot of time looking at why things work, but you don't hear a lot about spending more time figuring out why things didn't work as well. That's interesting.
- Jennifer** Everybody focuses on the winners, but you want to also look at, do you think about like, 'Wow, this is a really great book. Why didn't more people read it? What happened? Was it the title? Was it the pitch? Was it the cover?' Like, 'This could have been great.' Sometimes, even when things have marketing, sometimes it's just the wrong moment for a book. *Private Lessons* won the California Book Award for YA. It is a beautiful book. It is gorgeously written. She has three starred reviews. It came out in May of 2020. It was just not the right time. It was just a terrible time. That book is gorgeous. It is one of my favorite books ever. I absolutely love Cynthia's writing.
- Sabrina** Yeah, the pandemic really did a lot.
- Jennifer** It's hard. It's hard on all of us.
- Sabrina** Yeah. Do you want to talk word counts?
- Jennifer** Here's the thing about word counts. Everybody freaks out about word counts. There's a great colleague, my fantastic, amazing colleague, Jennifer Laughran did a wonderful post about word count. You just have to google Word Count Dracula, and she does a whole post of all the different categories, and what are suggested ranges of word counts. Here's the thing about word counts. If you've got a 175,000 word novel, it is probably too long, and it shows to me that you have not revised and you haven't tightened it up. Same thing. If you've got a 30,000 word novel, it's probably too short, and you probably don't have layers that are needed, like of characterization, of point of view, of subplots. And so, those are the basic things about word counts. I'm never too worried about word count. I've worked with a lot of clients where maybe it starts out when I first see it at the right word count, like say, I don't know, 70,000 words for a YA novel, and then it pushes up to 100,000 when you're revising. I find a lot of writers, when the word counts gets very expansive, especially in a novel, is that the writer is trying to figure out how best to say something or to express something, to convey an idea. And, they might do it, they might say it three times, and that's okay because you're figuring it out through revision of what's the best way to say it. And, my guess is - out of, and usually nine times out of ten - one of those three ways is the right way to say it. And so, you just cut the other two.
- Sabrina** You do. You see a lot of things in threes. It's really common.
- Jennifer** So, I don't want you to worry about if your word count is getting really big during your revision process. Just don't worry about it, it's okay. You'll go back later and revise and ruthlessly streamline it. But, usually it's just that whatever is repetitive, it's because you're saying it multiple times. And so, you just have to look for that, see where you said it best, and cut the rest.
- Sabrina** That's really good advice.

Jennifer The same is with picture books. If it's a really long picture book, you look for anything that can be conveyed by art - like, we don't need to know what Jennifer is wearing, or has blonde hair, or that she's wearing glasses, or that she's got an ivory colored sweater on right now, because the picture is gonna show that it doesn't need to be in the art. So, you just look for opportunities where you can slice away words. I'm never that worried about word count, although if I get a 2,000 word picture book, it's just to me that you need to revise it more and same with a really long YA book. And, like I said, if it's too short, if it's a novella, it just means that there's not enough story. And, you had asked earlier about novellas. The thing about novellas is that it's hard to sell a novella if it's really short. Most people are looking for a novel. And so, it's just why not make it into one so I can sell it for you? It means probably you need to go deeper into characters. You need to have some deeper subplots, you need to go deeper into your protagonist's needs and stakes and inner mind, and you need to make sure that all of your characters have full character arcs.

Sabrina Not just your main character.

Jennifer Yeah. That will make your book a better book.

Sabrina That all makes perfect sense. Has your wish list changed any? Because you've got a lot out there on your wish list. So, do we do...

[Both laugh]

Jennifer Yeah, I mean, right now I would really love... I'm really having a horror moment. I would love to find a good thriller. I would love to find a really good YA thriller. One that just completely surprises me, takes me off guard where I did not guess the ending. I read a ton of thrillers. I can usually figure out what's gonna happen and if you can stump me, fantastic. Or, if I think I know what the answer is and I'm right, but you have a twist on it that I never expected. Even better. I would love to find that. I'm still looking to find a good spooky middle grade that feels really exciting. I love stories where there's magic in our world if only we knew where to look. And I love to be scared. And I would also really love to find a book that is just about regular kids, regular things, nothing extraordinary, but where I really feel like I know this character and I feel like I'm deep in their head and they provide either something that makes me laugh, or something that makes me cry, or better yet, both.

Sabrina Yes, all the feels. All the feel books. I love the feel books.

Jennifer Yeah. I'm probably not as much looking for picture books right now, for picture book texts.

Sabrina Are you pretty full on your picture book list right now?

Jennifer I have a lot of picture book people right now, yeah. Did you want to talk about prologues?

Sabrina We don't have to. I don't want to take up too much of your time, so I'm kind of peeking at what would be the most helpful for everybody.

Jennifer Okay, well, I know everybody always wants to know about prologues.

Sabrina They do. Do you want to streamline them and maybe instead of, like, discussing everything we can talk about prologues maybe telling us when you think prologues work really well, versus when you don't need them?

Jennifer Yeah. So, the issue with a prologue - so prologues - to prologue or not to prologue, that is the question. So, the thing about a prologue is it's difficult to pull it off well. And, you'll hear a lot of people say, don't do a prologue. And, the truth is, if you can do a prologue well, you should do it, but it's really hard to do well. And, when I get a submission and I see a prologue, it usually happens one of two things. Either the prologue is amazing and awesome, and I'm really hooked into the story, and then first page chapter, and the kid's in bed and doesn't want to get out of bed, and it's really boring, and like, 'That's my life and I don't want to read about it, and I don't care.' Or the flip side will be that I'll get a prologue that's really confusing, and I'm not really sure what's going on, and I don't have enough context to get grounded in the moment. And, then the prologue ends, and then the first chapter begins, and I can tell that's where the story begins, and then we don't even need that confusing prologue. It's fine. And, in that second case, when I see that, if there's a prologue that just doesn't make sense to me, but the first page is great and the story goes from there, that's very easy. We just let that prologue go, and we go from there. If the prologue is really the more interesting story, then maybe the writer should consider staying with the prologue moment and not shifting to another place. I think those are the problems with prologues. Every once in a while, a prologue can be really great and gives some context and interesting information to launch us into the story. But, I think the reason you don't see very many, very often, is because it's really hard to pull it off and do it well.

Sabrina They are hard. And, I mean, a lot of people talk about skipping them, too.

Jennifer When I was a kid, I always skipped them.

Sabrina Did you?

Jennifer Yeah.

Sabrina I don't remember if I skipped them as a kid. I don't think I did. I'm pretty -

Jennifer A rule follower?

Sabrina I am. I'm a rule follower sometimes.

Jennifer When I was a kid, I always skipped the prologues.

Sabrina Did you ever read the last page first?

Jennifer I did not. But I would read forward to maybe the titillating point parts of a book and then go back.

Sabrina Okay, that's cute. Yes. I couldn't do that. I couldn't read the last page first. That would give me so much anxiety.

- Jennifer** I don't and actually, now, even when someone is pitching something to me, I like to read to discover. And, if I know what the ending is, then I don't necessarily know if the beginning and the middle are working. So, I never want a synopsis or anything. If I like your book, I want to read to discover. And, a lot of times I'll have people pitch to me and then they'll start to give me a summary and tell me how it ends up. If I'm gonna read your book, I'm gonna read it to find out what happens on my own, because I want to know if I can guess and if I'm right, I want to know if you can trick me and keep me guessing.
- Sabrina** Nice. I think it's really helpful, too, when you're editing the early parts, when you haven't finished, because you get those initial feels on it. It's different looking back at a novel as a whole, to see what it needs in the beginning than it is as you're going through it.
- Jennifer** I think you're right. Well, I like to have the full reader experience through the draft, but I do think as a writer, you have to get to the ending before you rewrite the beginning, because knowing where you're going will help you figure out where you need to begin. The other thing about prologues, and also beginnings in general, is I think many writers - and I will throw myself into this ring - will write a beginning, and that is how they access the story. And so, it becomes the beginning, and it's really hard to let it go because that's how you got into the story.
- Sabrina** Those are your first lines on it. Yeah.
- Jennifer** Yeah. And, I see a lot of projects where the story is starting in the wrong place, and that's the feedback, but it's so hard for the writer to see that because that's how they got into the story. And so, like, the prologue was how they figured out how to get into the story. And, you probably actually don't need it. Which is great when you've got a big word count.
- Sabrina** It is - just chop it off and then - gone.
- Jennifer** There you go. Bye. Bye.
- Sabrina** Before we go, do you want to tell us about some books, maybe some client books, that have either recently released or have recently announced, or that are about to release that you'd like to shout out about, and get everybody to add to their TBRs?
- Jennifer** Well, probably the biggest book right now that just came out for me is *The Sunbearer Trials* by Aiden Thomas. That is very exciting. We just announced yesterday Justin Colón's, *The Quacken*, which is a picture book.
- Sabrina** I just saw that on Twitter. It looks really cute.
- Jennifer** Yeah. And, let's see, what else have I got? There is a YA coming out next year called *A Guide to the Dark* by Miriam Metoui, which I'm very excited about, which is about two girls who are on a college road trip and get stranded at a hotel that is trying to kill them.
- Sabrina** Yes. Okay. That sounds really fun. Okay. And, do you want to tell everyone where we can find you?

Jennifer Yeah, you can find me at andreadbrownlit.com. There are four Jennifers at Andrea Brown. It's very confusing. We are all fantastic. I have the great luxury and pleasure of working with amazing, amazing women and colleagues. But I am the fourth Jennifer and the last Jennifer at ABLA. And, I think I'm right in the middle.

Sabrina You're third from the bottom, I think.

Jennifer I'm third from the bottom. Okay. Yes.

Sabrina I was just looking at the website when I was getting stuff together.

Jennifer Yeah. And, actually, I need to do a new headshot because my hair grew out during the pandemic. So, I had short hair when I had the picture taken, and now my hair has passed my shoulders.

Sabrina It looks good.

Jennifer Oh, thank you.

Sabrina Speaking of Andrea Brown, y'all just changed your policy, and you can submit to more than one Andrea Brown agent.

Jennifer Yes, you can.

Sabrina I think is it three total?

Jennifer I think so.

Sabrina For one project? I think it's three.

Jennifer I think so. I was at a conference when they made the changes.

Sabrina So, it's not more than four. The top is maybe four. I think it's three.

Jennifer I think it's three. You can query three of us but at the same point in time, and they shortened the amount of time before you can send a revision in. But, I would encourage everyone to still really take the time to revise before you send back to me, and really revise those opening pages. Because you don't want to give me a reason to say no.

Sabrina No, you definitely don't. Did you give us your Twitter? I'm so sorry.

Jennifer Oh, that's okay. My Twitter is [@marchsoloway](https://twitter.com/marchsoloway), so it's march as in the month, and then solo way. S as in Sam, O, L as in Larry. O-W-A-Y. So, all one word [marchsoloway](https://twitter.com/marchsoloway).

Sabrina Well, this was so awesome! Thank you, thank you.

Jennifer You're so welcome. It was fun to meet you.

Sabrina I know. It was super cool.

Jennifer Fun to talk books.

Sabrina I know. Also, before we get off, I really need to comment. I love your shirt.

Jennifer Oh thank you.

Sabrina Or your sweater.

Jennifer Thank you.

Sabrina I've been looking at it, 'Your Voice Matters' this whole time. Like, I have to remember to tell her that I love it.

Jennifer I really believe this.

Sabrina Is that a book shirt, specifically?

Jennifer No, it's a sweater I found in the store. No, but I really believe this. I really believe that every writer has a story to tell. I really believe that everyone has a voice and everyone's voice matters.

Sabrina I mean, you were talking about that in another interview as well. That's why I was like, is that... and it's something we see a lot in the writing community about voice mattering.

Jennifer Well, I think, also, that I meet a lot of people like, 'Oh, am I really a writer? Do I have anything to say?' And, like, 'Yes, you do.'

Sabrina Yes, everyone has something to say.

Jennifer Yes. And, you'll find your audience. And, I think the secret to finding your audience is being - you know, writing your emotional truths, being your honest self. And, that's when you will connect with others.

Sabrina Okay, everyone! That's it for Episode 6. I'll have a Content List, an Interview List, and all the Jennifer links in the Show Notes page of my website. Thanks so much for joining us! Okay, Ginny, say goodbye!

Ginny Barks.

In this episode:

Judy Blume (Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret; Deenie; Forever...)
A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle
Dragonwings by Lawrence Yep
The House with a Clock in Its Walls by John Bellairs
Private Lessons by Cynthia Salaysay
The Lucy Variations by Sara Zarr
Even When You Lie to Me by Jessica Alcott
Children of Blood and Bone by Tomi Adeyemi
Laura Rennert - Executive Agent at Andrea Brown Literary Agency
Waterball (a toy)
Smile (horror movie, 2022)
Random House
HarperCollins
If You Miss Me by Jocelyn Li Langrand
Year of the Cat by Richard Ho, illustrated by Jocelyn Li Langrand
Jennifer Laughran's Wordcount Dracula blog post
The Sunbearer Trials by Aiden Thomas
The Quacken by Justin Colón, illustrated by Pablo Pino (coming 2024)
A Guide to the Dark by Meriam Metoui (coming 2023)

Jennifer's interviews:

Middle Grade Ninja - Episode 12 - March 5, 2019
AgentChat Live with Sarah Nicolas - September 24, 2020
MG Book Party - November 16, 2021
The Visual Storytelling Podcast - 2 parts - June 27, 2022

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