

**Today on The Lerner Podcast we talk to Beth Mills, creator of Ella McKeen, Kickball Queen. In this picture book, first grader Ella is the undisputed kickball champion until a new girl named Riya shows up—and shows Ella up at recess. Ella reacts by throwing a fit! Will she ever be able to show her face on the kickball field again? *Kirkus* called the title “an emotionally intelligent book with strong feelings.”**

**Hi, Beth, welcome to the podcast.**

Hi, thank you so much for having me.

**What inspired Ella McKeen, Kickball Queen, your debut picture book?**

I really got the idea for the character first I came across this absolutely adorable picture of a small girl who had the most amazing pigtails. They were long, they were flowing. They were actually blonde. So I did change that, but I could just see those pigtails in action, and thought that she looked like a girl who would enjoy a good sport. So, kind of started from there. And I've always liked kickball. Um, I didn't play all that much. I wasn't a very, well, I wasn't a very--very good at sports as a kid. I played a lot of sports because I had to. Went to a small school and they needed every able-bodied person on the field for everything but I like kickball as a concept. It seemed a lot easier to do the baseball I guess or softball because the ball is a lot bigger, and I'm a lot more coordinated with my feet than my hands. So just decided to go with kickball. And I also thought that it would be nice to show some rivalry in a way that didn't end with like a nice kind of ending where they didn't become fast friends or anything like that, like I feel like there's still a little bit more exploration that needs to go on with those two and their relationship.

**What do you think is next for Ella and her rival Riya?**

Well, I would like to see them--I mean, I'd love to see them interact more. And I feel like the rivalry would extend probably beyond the kickball field to really every aspect of elementary school life. I would really like to see them take on another sport together. And also I'd love to see them trying to be on the same team. I think that can be really fun. Like how do you deal with your rival when you have to work together.

**I feel like they might become like Paris and Rory in *Gilmore Girls*, you know?**

Yes, it could--it could very much be that dynamic.

**Except for way sportier. Way sportier.**

Yes. Except Yeah. Sporty instead of, I guess, kind of--kind of nerdy.

**What were you the queen of in elementary school?**

Probably drawing. I loved to draw. And my mom has kept some of my homework from that period of time like kindergarten-first grade, I would have completely blank homework but this like absolutely gorgeous picture of horses around the border, like running around the border. And so they were a little bit concerned about my--they were concerned that I might have some learning difficulties, but it turns out I just really preferred trying to do my homework. And I was kind of that kid that was known as the good drawer in elementary school. So I think that was kind of my thing. I also liked to read a lot.

**How did you take it from the good drawer in elementary school to eventually becoming an illustrator?**

Well, it was not a straight path. I did--I actually went to--my undergrad degree's in theater. I was on the technical side, so a lot of electrics and learning about how to move sets around and build things. I got to use power tools in college, which was awesome. But it was still connected to storytelling and I love that. And after college when I learned that working as a theater tech in the real world was a lot more difficult than I anticipated, I kind of bounced around but always at the back of my mind was thinking about something in the arts. After a very brief and somewhat disastrous year teaching preschool, I decided that children's books seemed like a good fit for what I felt my strengths were and also, you know, people get paid to draw doing children's books and I thought that sounded good. So I actually decided to go back to school, and I got my master's in illustration and built up a portfolio and from there was able to kind of transition into the kidlit career path. It was--it took a long time. It was about from when I decided that that's what I wanted to go for to getting my--this book contract was five to seven years. Somewhere in there.

**Do any of your former preschool students show up in your work in little ways?**

Well, one of my kids was named Riya. Actually, I realized that the other day. She was--she was a really cute kid, but the character's not really based on her in any way. And I think like I got a--I got a front row seat for several tantrums, so I was very well versed in what a kid looks like when they're throwing a tantrum. I mean, I also have two young kids, so yeah, that's a, sadly, a daily occurrence of our house It feels like.

**So you have some hands on experience.**

I do.

**That spread is gorgeous. We'll--we'll put it in the show notes It's-well it's gorgeous in a terrifying way. Having minimal exposure to small children but just enough where I--I know that look, I know that meltdown.**

Oh yeah. It's like it's--there's nothing quite like it. It's a--it's a trip.

**So besides Ella's epic tantrum, what were some of your other favorite elements to create?**

Oh, I love doing the different kicks near the front of the book. The zinger particularly that's blowing that kid over backwards--that, that was really fun for me. And I hid my son's stuffed animal in the book. His--his bun bun, his special bun bun, so that was kind of fun for me. It's on the when she's thinking about her feelings page. When she's tucked into bed. That little stuffed rabbit is based off my son's special stuffed animal. He thinks that's the neatest thing ever, which is also fun. And I love doing all of the--the hand lettering, the typography, that was a really neat element that I hadn't explored extensively before this book. So that was really fun for me to learn. I guess not really even learn it but dabble in a new skill that I'd love to expand on.

**Are there any other picture books that spotlight social emotional learning that you'd recommend?**

Well, my favorite is a little older. Came out in 2016. And it is called The Snurtch by Sean Ferrell and illustrated by Charles Santoso. It's about--it's so cute. There's this little girl, and she clearly is kind of having a rough time of things, but all the rough times are caused by her snurtch, which is the embodiment of her kind of grumpy feelings. And I just love the--I love the illustration of the snurtch. It's just the cutest thing.

**Great, thank you. We will link to that in the show notes. Thanks for joining us on The Lerner Podcast.**

Well, thank you so much for having me. This was fun.

**Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.**