

[Allie] Hello, everybody. And welcome to another KidsLIVE program. Today, with us, we have author and illustrator, Kat Leyh, who has created Snapdragon, which you might recognize from our best books for kids 2020. Today, Kat's going to present to us about how she writes, how she draws. She's going to show us a little bit about her process and answer questions from some of our librarians here. Thank you so much for joining us today, Kat.

[Kat] Thank you for having me. I'm happy to be here. As Allie said, I'm the author and illustrator of Snapdragon. It's a graphic novel about a young girl who goes to confront her town's local witch, that she doesn't believe in, to confront her about her missing dog. And, instead, ends up forming an unlikely partnership with her. And she learns more about herself, magic, and even Jack's own unlikely connection to Snap's family's past. And today, I want to talk a little bit about how I got to where I am today, with this really cool job that I get to do. I started as an artist. Like most people, I drew when I was a little kid, and I just never stopped because I loved doing it so much. I went to college for it. And I didn't even read my first comic book until I was in high school because, where I lived, we didn't have any comic book shops. No one that I knew read comics and I just didn't really have access to them. And as soon as I started reading manga, I started realizing how cool of a way to tell a story that comics were. And the whole time, I was drawing a lot. And I was too shy really to ask any writers if I could draw a story with them. So what I ended up doing was just making up my own stories. I started thinking about what I wanted to draw, like I really like to draw birds. So one of my very first comics was about this little girl who was a witch and another little girl who had bird wings. And I just kind of went from there. I started drawing really short comics, about three, six, twelve pages. It's a really good way to get experience because you get to finish this little project and you have it done in your hands, and you realize that you can do it. And I started doing longer and longer stories. I put them online. And my first editor that gave me my first job, my first professional job drawing comics. So one of my comics, that was online. And it really just it went from there. I started doing more comics for money and then I started writing comics which was really surprising to me because this whole time that I was making comics, I didn't think of myself as a writer even though I'd been writing this whole time. And then, suddenly, I was just writing. I was writing a series called Lumberjanes which is a monthly series about this, this group of young girls that go to summer camp in the woods where they encounter all of these creatures and monsters. And it's about all the adventures that they go on. And I started writing that series. And I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it because I'd never done it before. And then I did that for six years, I think, at this point. And that's really how I got started. I didn't really think that I would end up doing this, and then I just kept doing it for fun. And eventually, I got good enough that I could do it for a job. So now, I do I really like to do graphic novels because I get to tell a whole story by myself. I get to write what happens and I get to draw all the pictures. So, I get to decide everything that happens which can be kind of scary but also it can be really fun when you get to tell the exact story that you want to tell. I do want to share a little bit of my drawing process here. I will say, in the back of Snapdragon, if you're really curious about the process of making a comic, I include these little examples, these little process pages that are in the back of the book. And it shows the really, really rough sketches that I do when I'm figuring out the story. And then the lines. And then I add the colors. And then I add the finishing touches, like shadows and lights. So if you're curious about that sort of thing, you can take a look at the back of the book where I go into a little bit

more detail there. Okay. We're going to move over here. Okay. So is this visible? [Chuckle]. Okay. So I'm going to show a little bit of how I draw. It's usually really light at first, like that. And I'll just draw the main character. Snapdragon. It's really rough like this usually.

So that is a really, really rough drawing. And that's usually what I start with.

And then what I'll do is I'll just take my solid brush like this. [Inaudible].

So right now, I draw with my computer and this drawing screen that I have [inaudible]. But when I first started making comics, I used watercolors. And then I started using computer when I went to college. I found that I really liked the way that I could draw with a computer. Finished. [Inaudible] For Snap, I can actually draw her really fast because I've drawn her so many times. And when I sign a book at a convention or bookshop, when I'm meeting people, I'll even draw a little drawing inside of their books. I usually draw one of the main characters. So I'll draw Snap. I'll draw dog. [Inaudible] Snap has a dog. And his name is Good Boy. He's a very good boy.

And I will say I don't usually draw this fast when I'm making a comic, but I have drawn these characters so many times that it's a lot easier to draw them now than it was at the very beginning. It's Good Boy. Okay. So that's some examples of how I, how I draw. Really, really simple demonstration of my process. I would love to answer any questions that anyone has about any of that. I can clarify. I can go into more detail. I do love talking about the process, but I guess, unless you're an artist, you might not be super interested in that but. What would you guys like to hear?

[Allie] Yeah. Thank you so much for telling us all about that process. I was drawing along at my desk. Well, I did try to draw my own Snapdragon. I don't know if you can see her.

[Kat] Oh, yeah. I can see her.

[Allie] But I really liked that you can sort of see the sketches behind the pictures. So, I kind of have a question that is partially about your drawing style and partially about Snapdragon itself. So one thing that it was really unique about Snap is how she found her love of anatomy, and her love of skeletons, and sort of articulation and putting all these pieces together. And I wanted to know how you were inspired to talk about this sort of thing. Have you ever been interested in taxidermy or skeletons? Or when you draw, do you think about the body shapes like that? And yeah. That's our first question.

[Kat] Yeah, absolutely. That's a good question. I do, I like thinking about anatomy a lot. When you learn to draw a person, you learn the kind of the shapes of the body, the basic shapes that a body is made up of. So when you think about a person's chest, you think about their ribcage and the way that that affects how they move and what they look like. So I already had an interest in

anatomy, in skeletons, and all of that. And I also I grew up in the country. And so, I liked finding little, you know, little jaw bones in the woods that was probably a vole or something. It feels like you're an archeologist when you find these little things in the woods. And I do, I can share really quick -- Just share. So this was my first little skeleton that I found in a corn field near my parents' house. It's a raccoon. And that was the first skull that I found that I decided to keep. And then more recently, my best friend, who is an art teacher, she has a student that also likes to collect bones. And so she sent me this deer skull that she found when Snapdragon came out, as a little present. So I do really enjoy skeletons. I think they're interesting. And that is, that is definitely where the, where it came from in the story. It was from my own interest.

[Allie] That's amazing. And I love seeing that that's like in part of the art itself and also part of your interests. Thanks so much for answering that. I'm going to pass it over to Jay now to answer questions from the chat.

[Jay] Hi. I got a bunch of really good questions already. First up, basic one but a great one. What are your favorite influences slash favorite authors or mangaka slash famous favorite comics? Like what kind of comics not only do you like but also what would you suggest that kids would read as well?

[Kat] That is such a good question. And it's not hard to answer but it's a very long answer because, obviously, I love so many artists and comics. I can say for sure one of my biggest influences as an artist is Hayao Miyazaki who does the Studio Ghibli movies. So Spirited Away and My Neighbor Totoro. And Kiki's Delivery Service is one of my favorite, favorite movies. And his style is very important to me. One of my favorite comic book artists is Chris Samnee who does a lot of superhero books. He actually he just came out with an all ages story called, I think, it's called Jonna, or Jonna J O N A. And his style is also really interesting. His was the first American comic book that I saw that I really, that I really liked. Because before him, I'd only seen some series from the nineties where I didn't really like how it looked. And then I saw his art and realized what comics could look like as well. And then mangakas. I'm reading Delicious in Dungeon right now by Ryoko Kui which is a really, really fun book about dungeons and dragons. And, gosh, I'm looking at my shelf. I do love a lot of different kinds of books. I have Unbeatable Squirrel Girl which is a really fun series. And the artist, Erica Henderson, is a wonderful artist who I'm a big fan of. But yeah that's a good sampling. I like plenty but those are some of my favorites.

[Jay] I've loved Squirrel Girl so much. So Christie asks, so readers of the book have said that the characters and their relationships are very authentic. Where did the inspiration for those characters come from?

[Kat] The inspirations for the characters came from kind of all over. It came from aspects of my personality, certain things that, that I really am like, in terms of my personality. Also aspects of other stories that I like. I really like stories where people form kind of unlikely friendships. I really like found family stories where people that aren't blood-related come together and they become very close like a family. Those are some of my favorite kinds of stories. So I put a lot of those

elements into my own stories because it's what I like to read.

[Jay] Oh, wonderful. So I believe that Sarah has a question. Sarah [inaudible].

[Sarah] Yeah. So what, did you have a favorite part that like to write or to draw? Like I know my favorite part when I was reading it was when Lulu came out at the end and everyone was like oh yeah, so cool. And it was just so, such a happy moment like just a little happy moment. And that was my favorite. But did you have a favorite to illustrate or write?

[Kat] I mean, I loved most of the books. It's hard to pick. There are certain parts that were more difficult. Some of my favorite things to draw were all of the One-Eyed Tom sequences. They were all very, very scary. And I really like the horror genre. So that was fun to try and make it as scary as I could. And I really liked, oh it might be kind of spoilers, but there's this part that happens in the middle of the book where things really change. And I get to draw a bunch of animals in a unique way. I don't want to spoil it though.

[Jay] All right. So from Elizabeth, we had, I love Jacks's corny T-shirts. Why did you design, why do you decide to make her indoor outfits like that? Especially compared to her scary outdoor, black coat, hat, and boots.

[Kat] So the way that I kind of thought about Jacks's clothing was that she doesn't really give a lot of thought to her clothes. She dresses for comfort and practicality. She gets a lot of her shirts and sweaters and things from thrift stores. She doesn't really care what's on it. So she ends up with some kind of funny, funny sweaters and shirts that she wears. And her outdoor outfit is you know black, doesn't show a lot of stains or dirt. So it's really easy to have it as outdoor clothing. She's got her boots because she's walking around in the mud. She's got a nice hat because she's walking around in the sun. So it just kind of happened to come together into a really scary outfit. She didn't really set out to look so intimidating. It just worked out that way. And so that's why she has this big difference between her indoor clothes and her outdoor clothes.

[Allie] And then, the next question we have for you is kind of like about your work as a whole. So you've done like we said a lot of work on Lumberjanes. You also had a webcomic Supercakes, right? So how is working with a team that's doing a continuing series different from working on your own graphic novel that's kind of your own story to tell from beginning start to end.

[Kat] That is a good question because it is pretty different. As you said, Lumberjanes is a team book. I am one of the co-writers for it. So, I work with Shannon Watters who is my other co-writer. And we'll come up with story ideas together. And then I'll write the scripts, and then I'll send the scripts to my editor, and then they'll send them to the artists who work on them. And we have an artist that does the lines, and then an artist that does the colors, and then an artist that does the lettering. So that is a pretty big team of people working together. And I'm just one part of that. And my writing process is a lot different because I'm writing scripts. And I'm being really descriptive for each description of the panel. And with Snapdragon, my writing process is almost completely different because I'm not writing any scripts. I'm thinking about what I want

the pages to look like. And I'm kind of just doing those really, really rough like what I was doing before with a really loose sketches. I do that to figure out the pacing of the story. And that's when I do the writing, is when I am doing these little thumbnails. So I actually start making a book by -- start making the book by doing drawings and sketches. And I start with the ones that are really clear in my mind. And then I work from there to figure out what connects these different scenes. And I kind of go from there. And I treat it a little bit more like a puzzle because I'll figure out this part, and then I'll figure out this part, and I'll figure out how to come together. But with Lumberjanes, it's a monthly series. And so I have to be more linear. So you start at the beginning, you do the middle, and then the end. So it's actually a really different process.

[Allie] Thanks so much. We hope we see more of a standalone graphic novels from you. Is that something that we might see in the future?

[Kat] Yeah. I had a graphic novel called Thirsty Mermaids come out just earlier this month. That one's for the older kids but I really, really enjoy graphic novels. So I fully intend to continue doing those for as long as I want.

[Sarah] So, one detail that I loved in the book was that Snapdragon, and her mom, and her grandma, and her whole family were named after flowers. Why did you decide to include that? Was that like an important part to you? Or was that just something that you thought was really fun or, you know, beautiful?

[Kat] I can't really remember why I decided to do that. It wasn't in the story in the very beginning. I didn't even have a name for Snapdragon yet. And I can't remember why I chose Snapdragon. I thought it would be a cool name. And it is. And when I thought of the flower element to the story, it really ended up coming together well. Because when I when I started the story, it's pretty different, there are certain things that weren't in the original idea that ended up being really important in the final book. And one of those things is Snap's grandmother and her role in the story. And so the flower part of the story wasn't as important in the beginning. And then it became important as I was figuring out the rest of the book.

[Sarah] I loved it. I thought that was just really like, it took it home for me just a small detail like that.

[Kat] Thank you.

[Jay] Awesome. So Christie has asked, and I agree, about sharing your love of possums. What is your -- well, one of the things I love about the book is that even Snap kind of looks like she has antlers with the hair. What was your favorite kind of animal to draw repeatedly? And what was your favorite kind of person to draw repeatedly? And also, as a Virginian, I say possum. Do you say possum or opossum?

[Kat] Well, I say possum, but I write it with a little asterisk at the beginning because a possum is a different animal from an opossum. So I like to distinguish the words when I'm writing it but I

say possum. I love possums. I love their weird faces and the kinds of expressions they make. And that was challenging for me cause I was really trying to capture that very, that very special possum expression. But Good Boy became pretty easy for me to draw because there's a lot of reference online for little pitbull puppies. And he just had this very simple face that became easy to draw, again because I drew him so much. Same thing with One-Eyed Tom as a fox. My mom actually took a bunch of pictures of a fox that was, it's kind of wandering around the property and she got some really cool close ones. So some of the drawings of One-Eyed Tom in the book were taken from those. They were inspired by the pictures that my mom took. So, it's easier to draw the animals when I have a lot of different reference pictures because I can see all the different angles of the animal. So, yeah. The possums were actually kind of the hardest ones to draw for me. But Good Boy was probably the easiest.

[Allie] So Jay, you stole my question. I was going to ask like what's your favorite animal to doodle? But we'll loop back around to maybe a bigger question that I really enjoyed about this story. So there are several characters in Snapdragon who experienced different journeys with their gender identity. Like Lou transitioning to Lulu and Jacks. So my question for you is why do you think it's important to include these stories in a magical graphic novel, and why choose a graphic novel to tell this story?

[Kat] Well, I chose a graphic novel because I love to draw. That is my medium. That is, that is the only way that I really want to tell a story is with pictures and in comics. It's important to me to include examples of kids that kind of get left out of stories for the most part. I wanted to make a story that I would have really liked when I was younger. I was very much and I still am a tomboy. I'm like, I'm like Snapdragon. And I didn't see a lot of examples of those types of kids in stories when I was younger. And same thing with trans kids is you don't see a lot of trans kids in the [inaudible] but there are trans kids, and there are kids that, no, a lot of kids, they question their gender and their relationship to it. And just like how Snap saw Lulu transition and saw that that is an option, to be trans, but she also felt like that wasn't quite right. But she also didn't really understand some of the other girls that she saw. And she was really trying to figure out her place in all of that. So yeah, it's just important to me to include the same kind of range in people that exist in the world as much as I can.

[Allie] I love that. And all of those stories, smaller stories within the larger story of Snapdragon coming into her power were really enjoyable and brought the story to a really special, emotional place for myself, as well.

[Sarah] So you had mentioned earlier that you had like a lot of things in your original draft that didn't make it to the end of the story. And, you know, things that made it to the end that you maybe didn't have in the beginning. So can you tell us a little bit of like what you would have included if you could have or some things that you cut? Like, I always like to see the back, like the behind details. So can you share some of that?

[Kat] Yeah. I will say all the changes that I made, I'm really happy with. My editors didn't -- they had a pretty hands-off approach to the story. So when I was sharing with them my process as I

was going, they didn't really have a whole lot to advise. They didn't say like, you cut this. Put something like this in. I'll say in the beginning, I was originally going to have an epilogue to the story where Snap was a little more grown up, and she was going off on a road trip on Jack's motorcycle. And it was going to be with Jack as a ghost. And I decided not to do that because I feel like every time there's an elderly person who's an important character in a story, they tend to pass away by the end of the story. And I didn't want that projects. And I also wasn't going to have Snapdragon's grandmother be as much part of the story. She, I think I was also going to have her already be dead or something like that. And I changed my mind because I liked, I liked the ending that I ended up with a lot more. Because it's easy to just have this elderly person like yeah, and at the end of the story, they pass away. You don't have to do that. She's still, these characters still have a lot left that they can do and will do. And it was the whole epilogue thing where you take a children's story and then you have the characters grown up at the end. You see that a lot. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. And my editor Kiara suggested that I don't have an epilogue and I just, and I agreed. And I liked the ending better the way that it ended up [chuckle].

[Jay] So I have two related questions that I love. One from Elizabeth is that you mentioned having witches and multiple stories you created. What is it about witches that you find so interesting to write about? And then from Anthony is, as a horror fan, are there any other monsters that you'd like to explore in future work? Monsters in quotation marks, of course.

[Kat] First of all, absolutely. Werewolves. My number one favorite monster. I love werewolf. I also love witches. I'm not sure exactly what it is, but I think I kind of explored it a bit in the text of the book when Jack is explaining to Snapdragon that witches are traditionally women who are kind of outside the norm. And they're persecuted throughout history and they're called witches. And that is used to take their power away. And that's kind of the real historical context of witches in history. But if you imagine a story where women, where people do actually have power, then there is kind of an empowerment in being othered, but by being othered there is a power to that. And you have, you get to explore these kind of fringe places in the world. It's very fascinating to me and the fact that you can be kind of othered but then have power in that I think is what is so interesting and fun about witch stories and witch characters.

[Allie] I can't wait to see what was the -- after seeing Good Boy, the pitbull, I'm very excited to see what your werewolves look like. So, all thumbs up for that. And so we have a kind of a mix of questions, one from Malika [assumed spelling] in the chat, and one from Archie is we have a lot of kids who come into the library who love to draw and write themselves. So what would some advice be from you to a young person who loves to draw and write, and might consider being an author and illustrator later in life?

[Kat] Yeah, absolutely. I think the best thing that you can do if you want to be, if you want to grow up and be an even better artist or writer is to write and draw a lot. Even if you feel like you're not good enough, the only way you're going to get good enough is by doing the thing. So it can feel a little frustrating when they advise, it's like, how do I get better at this? And it's like, just do it [chuckle]. It can be a little frustrating but that really is the only way to get better. And I

would also suggest, if you like storytelling, to try to do a short story first. I can totally relate to the, that experience that you have is this long epic, amazing story that you want to tell in your head. And you want to you want to do that as your first thing. But sometimes that can be really intimidating and you can end up getting discouraged. Because it's a lot of work. But if you start with something like a little five-page comic, you can do that. You can finish it, and then you can hold up your finished story and say, I did this. I finished it. And then you can do another one. And each one that you do, you learn more and you get better. And then there's absolutely time in there for your like 200-page epic comic that you want to do.

[Sarah] When you were growing up, what was your favorite book to read? Did you have a favorite genre? Like what would you recommend for kids to read today that you loved?

[Kat] Yeah. I was a voracious reader. Well I was, I should say, a great avid reader. I read a lot. I read everyday. I very much liked to take out as many books as a library would allow and just go through them. I liked a lot of different kinds of books. I really liked, I liked fantasy. I liked, I liked stories about kids with powers, obviously. It's one of my interests. My favorite author when I was a little older, so like middle school, high school, is and still is actually, Terry Pratchett who has a series called Discworld which is my favorite book series. When I was a little younger, I was really into the Golden Compass series. His Dark Materials which the first book is Golden Compass. I really liked that one because it was kind of dark but it was a kid story. And it was really creative. And certain, certain aspects of that, that series really stuck with me even, even to now. But yeah. I was trying to be like Matilda and read every single book in the library. Didn't quite get there, but I did end up reading loads of books. [Laughter].

[Jay] On that same topic because libraries are multi-modal for kids a lot of things. Besides books, I know we love books and comics, what other things have inspired you growing up? Like what kind of movies or shows or even video games? Like what sort of media really inspired you outside of that?

[Kat] I am definitely very inspired by animation. I love animated movies and TV shows. I mentioned Hayao Miyazaki. So his movies are like top tier in terms of inspiration. Also there's an animator named Mamoru Hosoda who does a lot of anime. So I like, I like anime, I really like traditional animation. So the kind that's that strong with pencils and paper basically. I've always found that really inspiring. When I was going to college, I took as many animation classes as I could because I really loved that method of drawing. And it's a good way to get better at drawing, by drawing animation because it's, that's all it is. It's lots of drawing. I was definitely inspired by those. I really liked Avatar The Last Airbender when I was in high school. That was, that was such a good show. And it was really creative. It was, it was a lot of fun because I love action movies and I love fight scenes. And so watching the martial arts with magic was really fun. Yeah. Action movies, lots of stuff. I would just watch a movie, and if I didn't like it, I would imagine how I would do it better sometimes. Sometimes I can come up with story that way [laughter].

[Allie] Amazing. So we're getting a lot of specific media questions in here. So I'm just going to



throw a bunch at you like lightning round. Are you ready?

[Kat] Yeah.

[Allie] Okay. What's your favorite Miyazaki movie?

[Kat] Kiki's Delivery Service.

[Allie] Kiki's Delivery Service. Great. Okay. What's your favorite kid's book character that you liked when you were a kid?

[Kat] [Inaudible]. Character. I'll say Tatterhood.

[Allie] Tatterhood? From what is that from?

[Kat] From the book Tatterhood.

[Allie] Wow.

[Kat] It's a picture book.

[Allie] Okay.

[Kat] It's great. You can check it out.

[Allie] Amazing. And if you could only write or only draw for a whole year, which would you choose?

[Kat] Well, draw.

[Allie] Draw? All right. You've made a pass for the lightning round. Wonderful job. [Laughter].

[Sarah] So I think we're coming to a close. So I had a final question for you which is, you know, a very, one you probably saw coming. But what are you doing next? I know you said you just have a book that came out this month, but is there anything else you're working on? Is there anything you can share?

[Kat] Nothing that I can share yet. I am, I'm right now working on pitches which is I should also talk about pitches. It's kind of like the little, it's your little story egg. It's all of the your story idea, your characters, the plot. All of those things before it becomes a book. That's what you give to a publisher to see whether or not they want to publish your work. So I've got two or three pitches that I'm working on right now. And at the moment, I'm doing some sample pages for those. So I'm at the very beginning stages of what my next project will eventually be. So nothing to share yet but things that I'm very excited to be working on.

[Sarah] Yeah, I bet we're all really excited to come read them. And I know we're all excited to read the one that you just put out. Yeah, so thank you for talking with us today. I really enjoyed it. I hope you did, too.

[Kat] Yeah, very much. Thank you for having me.

[Sarah] So you guys can tune in for some more author interviews on KidsLIVE, and I hope to see you soon. Bye.