

[Narrator] Welcome to the Wrighter's Way Podcast where we celebrate writers who have completed their books and inspire writers who haven't. Join Laurie and her guests as they talk about writing, books, and life in between chapters.

[Narrator 2] Sponsored by the I can handle it, I'm the dad t-shirt. Find it at lauriewrighter.com. Hi everybody, welcome back to the Wrighter's Way Podcast.

Laurie: I'm Laurie, here today with the fantastic Dennis McGregor. Talking to him about his life and his stories and his art. Welcome, Dennis.

Dennis: Thank you, Laurie, nice to see you this morning.

Laurie: Thank you, you as well. Where should we start?

Dennis: I don't know, well, let me, I'll tell you how this got started. So I did a Kickstarter to publish a book and Dianne Albert happened to see that and contacted me. Oh great, it's a telephone.

Laurie: Ignore it. Do want me to pause, is it important?

Dennis: There. She contacted me and said she liked the book and asked if I was on Amazon and I said no and she goes why not? And I said well I don't know and previous to that, I had another book that I had funded through a Kickstarter that sold well initially locally and then there about half gone sales died out and I just kind of left them, stored them at shop, you know? Why don't you put that on Amazon and I said why would I? Who would know it's there? Who would go to Amazon to buy it and that was my ignorant thought, you know? Dianne kind of came along and gave me a nudge and told me how she was doing on Amazon and that I could do the same if I really wanted to. That kind of got me started and then of course, I became part of this Facebook group which is how I met you and you guys are just totally inspiring to me because you're able to sell stuff and I don't really think of that that much. I just like to make stuff.

Laurie: Yeah.

Dennis: Get by, you know. So it's a new phase in my life. Here I am in my grandpa years, you know, and I've done all kinds of stuff up til now and always been an artist in one way or another but never considered myself an author. It's kind of funny that people are calling me an author now but I've made a couple books so I guess I am.

Laurie: And so you're very creative. Like you've spent your whole life as an artist in one form or another.

Dennis: Yeah, I was gonna study art in college but after one year, I dropped out to play in a rock and roll band. Take one semester off, you know, get it out of my system. 12 years later I was still in the band and now I was married and had twin daughters and everything changed. Actually, three out of the five guys in the band all got married and had twins.

Laurie: Really?

Dennis: Yeah, isn't that cool? And we all of a sudden had a lot of mouths to feed and everything got a little different. And so by now, I had ruined my life. My parents, my teachers, there once said because I dropped out of college and had a life of rock and roll and all that. And so I was a little bit nervous about my future but I knew that I could be an artist 'cause I could draw when I was a kid and that's what I wanted to do. I was doing kind of odd jobs. I bought a fixer upper house so I learned to be a carpenter and do all kinds of skills to remodel the house and then I started doing some of that for other people for extra money. And I realized that I could do a whole lot more damage with a skill saw than I could with an exacto knife and it was noisy and if I was sitting at a drawing table, I could listen to music. I just thought I think I'd rather go that direction than be a construction guy. So I started out doing graphic design and the job that I was doing is actually extinct now, Pay Stub Artist. Young people probably don't even know what that is but before computers, we had to get type setting from a source where you would buy it and then you would wax it and put it on a board and paste it all up and then it would be photographed and that would be a magazine page or a menu or a flyer, whatever.

Laurie: Okay.

Dennis: And that's a bygone job now. I was good at it, too. Took a lot of pride in it. But then that led to my first drawings. I did some line drawings and stuff for ads and then eventually, I moved from Southern California to this little town in Oregon, Sisters. Tiny little town. Most ridiculous move ever like oh, I could make a living there. But ironically, I started painting after I got to Sisters and I started getting all these jobs doing posters. Poster illustration for events like music festivals and such. There's the world's largest outdoor quilt show happens in Sisters.

Laurie: Okay.

Dennis: A town of a thousand people swells to 20 or 30 thousand people one day when all these people come to see these quilts hanging all around town. And I thought I should do a poster for that. So I started doing that and one of them in particular was a big hit. The concept was covered wagons with quilted tops. And for some reason, that really struck a cord with people. I didn't know it at the time but it really did and so that led to me making up a whole story based on covered wagons and the Oregon Trail and that became the first book called Dream Again.

Laurie: Ah.

Dennis: So both my books started out as a group of paintings and I stitched together a story and then completed more paintings to finish it out. My current book, *You Stole My Name*, started out with a painting I did one day on kind of a day off. I didn't have anything in particular I had to do and I thought what would I like to paint? For some reason I thought of a turtle and rather than the normal deal of a turtle, I thought I'd like to do the underside but how would that work? Wouldn't want the turtle lying on

its back so I had it climbing up on a barbed wire fence. It was kind of ambitious to get up higher and then I'll put a bird on a wire next to it just for scale and to know it's up in the air and I got painting this bird and then suddenly I realized the bird was not only a dove, but it was a turtle dove. So I had a turtle and a dove and the dove was a turtle dove and that made me crack up a little bit and then other people who saw it kind of had the same reaction so I thought what else can I illustrate with that concept so then I did a bullfrog and then a parrot fish and one thing led to another and pretty soon, I had a group of paintings that I was displaying in a local restaurant and people really got engaged by them and I would hear from the servers there that people just sit and guess what they were called. So I knew I was kind of on to something so then I thought maybe this can be a book. So then I wrote verses for each and finished them all up and it turns out that people really liked this book.

Laurie: Well your artwork is magnificent.

Dennis: Well thank you.

Laurie: You're welcome. I saw it and I thought it was a traditionally published book. I think I was seeing ads on Facebook that you were doing and so we had been friends so that's probably why it popped up and I think you had some of the inside pages up there and it reminded me of another series of books and oh, this person's done this and oh, it's my friend Dennis because I hadn't seen it. I had seen you and your name and the book in the group but I hadn't seen your book. But it's truly art. When I go to chapters indigo, I look at the kids' books and I feel badly about my own because those ones are works of art and that's the same level I think yours is on.

Dennis: You have no reason to feel bad about your own. Just kind of different things.

Laurie: It's just different.

Dennis: Between two covers, you know. The reason mine ended up to be so large. It's pretty big.

Laurie: Yeah.

Dennis: It's like a coffee table book for kids and the reason is because the paintings were already horizontal and to reduce them down much smaller, it was just bugging me. They didn't look very good to be small. I'm used to them being larger but I thought what the heck. I know it's not as economical and not as good an idea, shipping and everything else to be bigger, but that's what it ought to be. That's kind of what gives it the appeal when you pick it up at a bookstore. Also like the idea of a parent and a child sitting next to each other and having it big enough to cross both their laps and read it.

Laurie: I need help to hold. My kids can help. So you were an artist forever and you did all these series of paintings and you thought why not make it a book and that was how that happened? That was the inspiration for the book?

Dennis: That's what kind of cracks me up about being part of this Facebook group. I'm just sort of like eavesdropping on everyone, lurking, not really participating that much because I'm not like everybody else there who most of them are people who are writers and they find illustrators to work with and they solve all their problems in working together that way and paying them and everything and for me, the artwork is what drives the book.

Laurie: Yeah.

Dennis: And so it's just a different process and I am writer in the sense that I've been a songwriter for years and I have albums out. So when I first realized I may be doing a public appearance with my book, *You Stole My Name*, to a school or something or a book store, I thought I should probably like take a guitar along and work into that and sing something and I was driving along one day, I was thinking I would write a song or what song I may have that would work and then I realized, wait a minute, I can sing the whole book. And so I tried it and it worked fine and I kind of added a little chorus to go with each verse, each page. And I realized well I write verses like I write songs and so it was very singable.

Laurie: Very singable.

Dennis: Easy to do. I have fun with the kids doing that and I have a little call and response part where they have to holler back which animal stole the other animal's name. Usually the first couple of rounds, they kind of get it wrong a little bit but then by the end of the song, they've got it dialed and they're yelling it out and so that's engaging and that's been fun.

Laurie: That's super fun. I used to teach kindergarten and the kids loved anybody who came with a musical instrument and they just ate it up. They loved it. I can just imagine that would be a really fun time.

Dennis: They're not as critical as my other audiences either.

Laurie: No, children are not. Young children are not. I'm curious what you've learned. So you've been an artist forever but now you've done two books. You've done a second print run of this book. What lessons would you say you've learned that you would like to share?

Dennis: Well, mainly it's not enough to make something. If you want to stay alive, you have to sell it. And the marketing part of it is just not my favorite part at all. I do like it when money comes in. That's never been a goal of mine. The goal has always been more in making the art and then hoping to get by. Lately, money was like flying in and I was like this is pretty darn cool.

Laurie: Yeah.

Dennis: And then I saw people like you and Dianne who are killing it on Amazon and I was like that would be great. That would be really great. At this point, I've pretty much exhausted my local market

here. The bookstores have ordered, re-ordered many times. I keep a box of books in the car everywhere I go. Hey, you got one of those books and I pull it out, sell on the street, you know? That can only last for so long so I need to get out of my own neighborhood, out into some other zones. That's a great way. What have I learned? I'm not sure what I've learned but one thing that I really like about this Facebook group is that I'm friends with and talking with people who live all around the world and that wouldn't happen in any other way. You're in Canada.

Laurie: I am. And we're friends. I know, it's pretty cool. Facebook has really changed how I live as well.

Dennis: Yeah.

Laurie: Yeah. So the selling part is fun when it works. It's fun to make the money.

Dennis: It's fun to get the money. Everything about the Amazon process has been particularly challenging for me. I don't know whether it's just 'cause I'm old or what but I was like one of the last people to get a computer. I was just holding out and it cracks me up now because I love my computer now but years ago, when people would talk about it, I would think there's nothing that I really want to compute. That's the last thing I want to do. If they called it a home entertainment center or something, it would have been a little different. Music and TV and everything's in there. And so I just put it off for a long time and so it took awhile to catch up but someone like you and Dianne probably grew up with computers and it's second nature and so every time I see like a form for Amazon, I look at it and I go uh, do they mean this or do they mean that? It doesn't come real naturally to me but I realized I made progress from when I started six months ago.

Laurie: Yes, 'cause you're on Amazon and your books sell.

Dennis: They have, not much yet.

Laurie: Not much on Amazon?

Dennis: No, I can't quite get it going yet. I might want to talk to you about that a little bit.

Laurie: Yeah, okay.

Dennis: No problem. I'm sure that it will eventually but every step of the way is, from entering one digit of my bank account incorrectly and the two times you enter your account, it took six weeks to get that changed and talking to many people in other countries about it and I just couldn't understand why can't I just change that number? But little things like that sort of played me.

Laurie: You should have just changed your bank account number to match whatever it was. It might have been faster and easier.

Dennis: Yeah. But you know, I'm getting past it and the thing is, I do other things to make money so this is just kind of a side thing. I still do commissions, paintings, for other people and other organizations and that's kind of my main job still. Plus I still do some music and I play out every now and then. I'm actually kind of surprising myself. I'm putting together a California tour in June and I'm going to go on the road for two days which I didn't know if I was going to do that anymore but you know.

Laurie: That sounds fun.

Dennis: The book thing though, I mean, I had it printed in China. They look as good as any book you would find in a bookstore.

Laurie: Absolutely.

Dennis: And I've got a whole bunch of them at value and people love it so it's just a matter of time.

Laurie: And your paintings from this book, somewhere in your town, they've made a mural of them?

Dennis: Well, the actual paintings have been in the gallery and many of them have sold which is also nice but I was contacted by first of all someone in my town that wanted to have a mural made to go in the space high up above the liquor store, of all places. And so I did a variation of one of the paintings in the book and then the next town over, Bend, Oregon, which is a larger town than Sisters, has a shopping district called the Old Mill District, and they said have you ever done a mural and I said look at that one I just did. And they said we love it. We want you to do some over here so I created three new pieces of art that were variations of pieces that were in the book, chicken hawk, bull trot, and mule deer, and they're like 15 feet long and five and a half feet tall and they got installed and right away people started taking pictures of themselves in front of them and sending them to me and it's been a lot of fun.

Laurie: That's great.

Dennis: That's leading to yet another mural job in Santa Cruz.

Laurie: Oh, do you enjoy painting on that scale?

Dennis: I don't paint them that big, I paint them the same size I normally would have here in my studio and then they become digitally photographed and then you can enlarge them and print them on metal sheets.

Laurie: Oh cool.

Dennis: That's really the only way it would work for me. I'm not going to go out there and get on a scaffold.

Laurie: Well I was wondering 'cause it looked really big. That's cool.

Dennis: Yeah, it's really cool. It's another benefit of the digital revolution has been made possible.

Laurie: Well, congratulations to you. You might feel like it's a slow progress but like you said, it's been six months and I feel like you've learned a ton. You're selling your books and then there's these offshoots of those art that you made.

Dennis: The spin of success. I have no regrets at all and the whole thing about Amazon and watching you guys is intriguing and I've been inspired. I've forced myself to spend about an hour each morning kind of studying it and fooling around with it and watching Youtube videos about it and stuff. There's a lot of information out there.

Laurie: There's a lot of information that is confusing because there's different, I don't know what to say, but Amazon has things for the products people sell and then for the books people sell and then digital things so it's confusing.

Dennis: You need reviews, you know?

Laurie: Oh okay.

Dennis: You got all these great reviews but Amazon won't accept them. Okay, have to learn about that now. Each of those steps is just another step forward. Get past them. I mean I had so many great comments from people from my Kickstarter campaign once they received their book, unsolicited letters that came to me and emails where they were raving about the book and none of that counted and it just kind of broke my heart like I can't believe what people are saying here and I can't use any of it and share it with people. So I had to start all over with Amazon's rules about getting verified purchase review and that's just the way it is.

Laurie: Well you can ask the Kickstarter people to put them up there, it just won't be verified.

Dennis: You mean like put them?

Laurie: So what I did is I wrote a Facebook message and I said please, it helps so much to boost visibility. Can you just leave me an honest review and it was the people that funded the Kickstarter so they weren't verified and of the 40ish people, maybe 10 or 15 did it which was lovely.

Dennis: Did it actually get posted as reviews?

Laurie: It did. So it was a couple years ago. Their rules have changed but it's hit and miss. What's that?

Dennis: They won't do that now.

Laurie: The people or Amazon?

Dennis: Amazon won't allow it. I've had so many people try and do that and they get taken down.

Laurie: Yeah.

Dennis: It's all good.

Laurie: Don't give up, it'll be good. Thank you for talking to me today.

Dennis: Well what've you been doing?

Laurie: What have I been doing?

Dennis: Yeah.

Laurie: I feel a lot like you. I feel like when I say I'm a writer, it's kind of like oh my goodness, I'm kind of a writer. I'm not creative like you are with artistic. I have ideas. I'm creative with the ideas. And so I don't feel like I'm a great writer and probably my reviews that are bad are, you know, it doesn't read great, it doesn't flow great, but the idea is really helpful and the ideas, I don't know, to me, that's where I'm creative. So I have a book at the illustrator right now and still have to write down all my ideas and try to focus myself. Just work on one thing at a time.

Dennis: Well your series is great in that it looks like a series. You see any one of your books and you know it's part of that series and that's brilliant. I think that's worth anyone considering to try and do that with a series of books.

Laurie: I learned that from listening to people who write novels. When they write novels in a series, there's a lot of wise people who have been there, done that, and they said it has to look like a series. My illustrator's creative, too, and she said can we do something different and so I have to say no, we need a giant head. Sorry.

Dennis: It works. The other thing I noticed in this group is that it seems like most of the authors are younger women with young children that are recognizing needs through their parenting at that stage and most of the books are written for very young kids. I don't see that many that are being written for like third, fourth, fifth graders that are just kind of in between picture books and novels and I find that kind of interesting.

Laurie: I'm in a couple of groups so there's more in another group that I'm in that write for that sort of middle grade but they find it really hard to market. Kids are either really reluctant readers at that age or

they plow through everything. So I think a lot of parents go to the library or are more picky maybe. I don't know but I hear that a lot, that it's hard to sell to that age, yeah.

Dennis: It's easier for young picture book kids.

Laurie: Yeah, I don't know why, maybe because they are more artistic and it's like you get a story but you also get that art that's fun to look at or maybe because little kids read so much.

Dennis: You know what I think?

Laurie: What?

Dennis: Adults like to look at pictures, too.

Laurie: They do.

Dennis: They love picture books and they use their kids as an excuse to buy them.

Laurie: Yeah, because they look like art. They're beautiful. Well, they don't look like art. They are art. Yeah, I agree with you. I have a 10-year-old son and so he loves those Dog Man and Captain Underpants and all those. He loves Harry Potter as well but he loves pictures.

Dennis: How old is he?

Laurie: He's 10. And so he needs that more difficult challenge of reading but he loves the pictures and he'll read those over and over and over.

Dennis: I gotta send you a copy of Dream Again.

Laurie: Okay. Thank you.

Dennis: This one, my first one.

Laurie: Yes?

Dennis: It's odd in that it has a page of text and an illustration on every page. I didn't know what I was doing with this book and after I got it done, I was so proud and I got them back from China and everything and I rushed down to the local bookstore and I showed it to the owner and he looked at it and he goes um, I don't know what to do this. Well what do you mean? He goes well there's too many words but it's not this and it's not that and it's 52 pages and a standard children's book is 32 and he says I don't even know where to put this in the store and it kind of shocked me and I realized I really don't

know what I'm doing. It took til the next book. But the thing is they sold a ton of the book anyway and it turns out that it's perfect for around third and fourth grade.

Laurie: 'Cause they love the pictures.

Dennis: They love the pictures but it's an epic story. It's like a little movie, really.

Laurie: Yeah, cool. I look forward to reading that with him.

Dennis: I'll send you one.

Laurie: Thank you. Okay, let's say goodbye. Thank you for doing this. You can stay on with me for a minute but I'll stop recording.

Dennis: Okay, thank you very much for having me.

Laurie: You're welcome, thank you.

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