

- [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] Every dad needs one. Sponsored by the I Can Handle It, I'm The Dad T-shirt. Find them at [lauriewrighter.com](http://lauriewrighter.com).

Laurie: Hi Don. Thanks so much for coming on The Wrighter's Way podcast with me.

Don: How are you?

Laurie: I'm good, how are you?

Don: Good, thanks.

Laurie: Awesome. Little technical hiccups, but well I'll try not to let it ruin my mood

Don: As an engineer, I'm used to that so.

Laurie: Okay, good. Good, thanks for not giving up and, you know, leaving. Okay, so Don, you have such an interesting background. I'm gonna dive right into it. Share with everybody what you were before you were a children's writer.

Don: So I spent about 18 years working at Yale University doing heart research. My under graduate degree is in biomedical engineering. So we did a lot of image work, but it was imaging of the human body.

Laurie: So a little bit different

Don: A little bit.

Laurie: Cool. How did you get into publishing?

Don: So I also am a soccer coach. I've been coaching for close to 20 years too. So I've always been involved with children and about five years ago I bought a franchise called Happy Feet, which is a preschool program for teaching soccer to ages three to five. And our tagline has always been story time with a soccer ball. So each week we go on an imaginary adventure with the kids and the soccer is just kind of built into those classes. And one day, I was interviewing a potential new coach and a gentleman walked up to me overhearing our conversation and said he was a children's book author and kinda offered to maybe collaborate and write a book. I said okay, but one thing led to another and we were never able to connect. So I said, you know what, maybe I can just do this by myself and so that was kind of the start. No idea what I was getting myself into, but that was kind of how it started.

Laurie: Oh, cool. Did you ever look that guy up? Does he have books?

Don: He does have books. He actually showed me his books that day. He like went out to his car and brought some in.

Laurie: Oh, okay.

Don: We tried to connect. He didn't show up, I didn't show up, whatever. I'm not sure what happened, but then I said, you know, I really know this program. Maybe I should just do this myself. And then figured out how to write the book after.

Laurie: This is a great example of having a passion, you know, that hobby that you're passionate about and just taking it that one step further and really putting it out there, which I love.

Don: Yeah, it's been a lot of fun. I never would have thought that I would end up being an author. I kinda went to engineering school to avoid creative writing.

Laurie: And here you are.

Don: Now I'm really excited about doing it. So, you know, people change too.

Laurie: Yes, yes. Well and a different job during your life, right?

Don: Absolutely.

Laurie: And how many books do you have published now?

Don: I now have four. They're all self-published. Three of them are Happy Feet books and then I've also written another book called Meet the Waats, a tale about being different. It's completely different genre altogether.

Laurie: Yeah, about emotions and feelings and--

Don: It's about, so the WAATS is actually an acronym for we're all the same, and so all the characters in the book look exactly the same. So how do you know any of their names? So each page in the book talks about what's really inside the person is what determines their individuality.

Laurie: Oh, I love it.

Don: It's a rhyming book instead of a pros book.

Laurie: Yeah, oh, so you went from technical writing to the creative pros to actual poetry of writing.

Don: Well, I'm not sure that it's poetry, but it's rhyme.

Laurie: Good for you. Okay, so I always ask people sort of about their emotional state on the journey of writing because so many people get stuck in that overwhelm and that nervousness before they publish so can you talk a little bit about sort of your emotional, you know, state before, during and after.

Don: Sure. So, like I said before, so I had this guy approach me and talk about writing books so I said I can do it. I thought it was gonna be easy. You know, 32 pages, how hard can this be? But being in engineering, I also don't just tend to dive into things. I tend to research what's going on. So I started reading about how to write a children's book, what goes into the illustrations, et cetera, and found that it's actually much more complicated than just writing down a couple words. And so, there was no time when I was really overwhelmed, but there are a lot of steps and so I think that the key is to take your time and figure out the steps, but at the same time, don't do nothing. Keep making some progress. Don't let the fact that you don't know everything stop you from starting.

Laurie: Right.

Don: And there's a ton of information out there that you can use to learn. And then as I got into it, I actually got more and more into it. I got excited about all the different components that are part of it, from finding an illustrator, fitting the words on the page, writing with as few words as possible and still get your message across. So there's so many different things. Then there's the whole part of marketing afterwards, which is a whole nother adventure.

Laurie: Yeah The hard part is writing the book until you're done writing the book.

Don: Exactly.

Laurie: And so how do you feel now you have four books published?

Don: Well, the fact that I have more than one I think says a lot. It wasn't one and done. And actually have more of the Happy Feet kids books series in mind. I have actually started on the second WAATS

book and I have two or three other series in mind. So it's just a matter of finding time to do all those things.

Laurie: Are you still working or is this like your full-time job now?

Don: So I run Happy Feet, so it's part of Happy Feet, it's part of that company, but I still do coaching. I run the business Happy Feet and do sales, websites, all the stuff that's involved in running a company as well. And I coach at two other locations too. I coach for a premier soccer team at a college as well.

Laurie: Oh my goodness. So you have to squeeze this in. This is not your...

Don: Yeah, well there's lots of time in the day. One of my favorite sayings is there's plenty of time to sleep when you're dead.

Laurie: I love that. So how long about does it take you to do a book? Like you say you have all these ideas and you're already working on the second and the fifth.

Don: Yeah, so the first one was definitely the longest 'cause of the learning curve. So one of the great things, I think, about being self-published is that you get to pick your illustrator and work with your illustrator as opposed to the traditional route where typically you write the book, you send them your manuscript and they put it together and you see what the end result is. But my illustrator is actually in India. So we go back and forth overnight. So I do some work, send it to them, I go to sleep, I wake up in the morning and they've done some work and it goes back and forth. But we've become more and more in sync as we've done the books as well, so there's less of the back and forth needed. So I think that's also accelerated things. So, you know, you write the book quickly, but then I put 'em away and leave 'em for a couple weeks before I go back to edit them just to let them kind of marinate. And then there's definitely editing and I've actually continued to edit as I see the illustrations. Sometimes the illustrations give me ideas of what I really wanna say. Or to get the words to fit on the page with the illustrations while I sometimes have to choose different words to get them to fit because I do the design too. I put the words on the illustration. I try to put my words in not just a paragraph block but kinda fit around the text.

Laurie: Yeah and did you have to teach yourself that or did you have a background in that?

Don: Sorry?

Laurie: Did you have a background in that formatting part?

Don: Nope. More stuff that I read about and read other books, saw what I liked in other books. And then played with myself to get it to be the way that I liked it. And again, that's part of the fun about being self-published is you can do whatever you want. You don't have to follow any rules really.

Laurie: Really? You could do it all yourself or you can hire just a little bit?

Don: I have hired editors to edit the text as well. So I do that.

Laurie: What program do you use to do your formatting, your text?

Don: So I use a program called the GIMP, G-I-M-P.

Laurie: GIMP?

Don: It's actually an open source program that's like Photoshop. It's not the most intuitive. But there's a ton of YouTube videos on how to use it and so I've used that to kind of figure things out. So I say I wanna do this, how do I do it? And I go look up how other people have done it with the ways to do it. So it's very flexible, but it's not very simple. But the output is really good.

Laurie: So as long as you have the time and you're willing to put the effort?

Don: Yeah, and again, being an engineer that's kinda what I do. That's been part of the fun learning all these different programs that do the different aspects.

Laurie: Did your illustrator do your cover design?

Don: Yes, yes.

Laurie: So you said you hired an editor, you hired the illustrator and the rest you've pretty much done yourself?

Don: The rest I've done myself, correct.

Laurie: And I was reading what advice you have for other people. So you've already shared a little bit about lots of steps.

Don: Yeah. But I think don't be overwhelmed by those steps. Realize that it's a process and you can write the story and then you can work on finding how to get it edited. You can work on finding an illustrator. You don't have to do it all at once. You can do it step by step. And each step you'll learn some and like I said, I think my fourth book is much better than my first book because of mistakes that I've made and things that I've learned. So I don't think that there's any reason to be scared of putting something out there.

Laurie: And that's a good progression. You want your fourth book to be better than your first one, right?

Don: Absolutely, absolutely.

Laurie: What would you say is the best thing that you've learned along the way?

Don: So there's a lot. But I think that the most interesting thing for me was that people do actually earn a living and make a profit off of children's books. There's a lot of things that say that you can't make money with children's books, but I don't think that that's true. I've met several people who can. But I

think it's persistence. I think it's learning. And I think that the other part is the marketing after you write the book, that the book's not just gonna automatically be found. You have to do some stuff to get it found.

Laurie: Yeah.

Don: And I think also trying to understand before you write the book what the market is, is also something that I've learned. What will sell?

Laurie: What will sell? Which area of the market is?

Don: Right, that you still feel comfortable getting into.

Laurie: Yes, that's great advice. That's great advice. Something that you're interested in, but that will sell is like the goldenideal.

Don: So, you know, researching again is how you do that. Look on Amazon. Go to the bookstore.

Laurie: Talk to librarians. I remember talking to a librarian and she's like anything dinosaurs. We cannot keep dinosaur books in the library. Anything with a dinosaur and it will go. I thought that was like.

Don: And then I also have a huge advantage 'cause I work with three to five year olds every day. So I know what they respond to.

Laurie: And the language. You know how they talk. You know how they think.

Don: Right.

Laurie: Yes, that is great.

Don: I basically play with them five days a week.

Laurie: Five days a week you do it?

Don: Or seven in the summer.

Laurie: Oh wow.

Don: Not all day, but a couple hours a day. So I'm with kids all the time and that really helps relate to them.

Laurie: Yes, that is a huge benefit. When I was teaching kindergarten I had so much information. You know, like that was all my research.

Don: And then I also, because I do our program at day cares, I also talk with the teachers and directors about what's going on with the kids so that I can really try to fit into their program, but that also then helps me to go write a book. And I think that's the other thing is I test my books as I'm writing them with the kids that I'm doing programming in. So I either read them to the kids or I have teachers read them to the kids so I can see how the children are responding. How the teachers are handling reading the book. You know, there's parts where they're struggling 'cause the text doesn't flow nicely, that kinda stuff.

Laurie: Oh, that's great advice. Test it out and if the kids stay put.

Don: Right.

Laurie: Is that how you gauge it?

Don: That's part of it, but also just even how they're reacting to it. So some of the stories that I've done are just like the program that we do, so the kids start to anticipate what's gonna come in the story, then I know the story fits with our class. With the rhyming one, some of the kids start to say out the next line before the teacher even read it because the rhyme in the pictures were working together to help the kids understand it. So not just are they focused, but are they engaged with the story.

Laurie: Have you ever done a test and somebody got up and walked away or said I don't like that or that's a crappy book?

Don: I haven't had that yet, fortunately. Most of the kids have been attentive, but they're three to five years olds and you're never gonna have all of them, so it's really a majority. But, like I said, if the kids are, even at the end of the book, if they're still guessing what's coming next, asking what the picture is, can they see the snake in the picture, whatever, then you know that they're still, for the most part, most of them are engaged. But, again, it's watching the teacher. If I had the teacher read, if the teachers struggle reading some line in the book because it wasn't written well, it was fine in my head, but the teacher tried to read it, it didn't work. So I look for that as well.

Laurie: I think that's so smart. That's great testing that I don't think a lot of people do. Have somebody else read it.

Don: Right and I've done it both ways. I wanna read it because I know what it's supposed to sound like, but I also wanna see other people read it 'cause that's what's gonna happen in the real world is that they're gonna be reading themselves.

Laurie: That's terrific advice. Okay, so I ask this for everybody so that people have a great expectation going into this business. How many dollar signs, well so how long has it been that you've been published and how many dollar signs about do you make a month let's say?

Don: So, the first book was published in the end of 2017, like October 2017. And my initial plan was to just sell it to the people in my Happy Feet company, so I didn't really do any advertising of it at all, although I put it on Amazon, I didn't advertise it at all. So the other three books all came out last year, so

one in the beginning of the year and then one on Thanksgiving actually and then the fourth one December 10.

Laurie: Okay.

Don: And around Thanksgiving is when I really, I think, kinda figured out the Amazon advertising a little bit anyway. So before that, I was selling from August to November I was selling about two books every three days on Amazon. And now I'm selling more than two books a day since Christmas. So Christmas is a funny thing. For Christmas I've continued kind of the same pace. So I think it's growing.

Laurie: It's growing?

Don: Pretty well.

Laurie: Yeah, so have you spent the royalties on anything super exciting or fun that you could share?

Don: Just reinvesting back in to write another book. It costs to pay for the illustrator.

Laurie: Yeah, yeah.

Don: Get it edited. It's really just kind of reinvesting.

Laurie: Okay.

Don: So nothing fun yet.

Laurie: Nothing fun yet

Laurie: Some day.

Don: Some day. Okay, well thank you. Is there any last sort of advice or ah-ha moments or anything that you wanna share with people?

Laurie: No, just have fun. Don't get overwhelmed with all the steps. Just enjoy the process, enjoy the ride and realize that, you know, it's probably gonna take more than one book to really figure it out and then have that book be successful. If you're really lucky, great. But it takes all of us a lot of time in anything we do to be good. So don't expect to be perfect the first tryout.

Don: So true, great advice. Thank you so much for talking to me today, Don.

Laurie: You're welcomed.

Don: Sharing your knowledge with everybody Okay, talk to you later.

Laurie: Alright, bye, bye.

Don: Bye.

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