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>> Ramon: [Background music] I'm Matt Ramon from the Library of Congress. Each year tens of thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival, sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady, Laura Bush. Now in its seventh year, this free event held on the National Mall, Saturday, September 29, will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best selling authors, illustrators, and poets. Even those not attending the National Book Festival in person can access the event online. Prerecorded interviews with well-known authors are available through the National Book Festival website in podcast format just like the one you're listening to right now. To download, you can visit www.LOC.gov/bookfest. I'm now pleased to be joined by the celebrated children's author, Megan McDonald. She's probably most notable in her prolific writing career for her award winning series of books featuring the character Judy Moody and the more recent spinoff series featuring her brother, Stink. Her latest book is "Judy Moody and Stink, the Holly Joliday," and that is not a spoonerism. That is the title of the book. Now Ms. McDonald has a Bachelor's Degree in English and a Masters in Library Science, and as the youngest of 5 sisters, I read that she said she began reading because she was having a hard time getting in a word edgewise. Thank you for joining us, Ms. McDonald.

>> McDonald: Thank you so much for having me.

>> Ramon: We are absolutely thrilled to have you for this year's National Book Festival, and why do you think the National Book Festival and really book festivals in general are so important for young readers and writers?

>> McDonald: Well, you know, I mean before I was ever a writer, I was a reader myself, and we didn't really have these kind of venues, and I think and especially being a librarian, too, I think, you know my whole life's work is about connecting kids with books, and these events are just wonderful celebrations of bringing kids and books together. I think any place or forum that can celebrate that, I'm all for it, and, you know, especially I think to have it at the nation's capital and have the Library of Congress involved and Laura Bush being, you know, the host, it just says to kids in the same way that a parent wants to model reading to their kids, it says to kids that we value reading, and we think it's important.

>> Ramon: Now what do you think your fans might expect to hear from you at the festival in September?

>> McDonald: Well, they probably... well most of my fans want to see the napkins. So I usually begin scribbling stories down on a napkin. So I bring that to show them, but I think my readers really like to hear where the stories come from. They always want to know what part of the story about Judy or Stink is really true. So I like to tell a lot of the funny, real life stories that have inspired Judy Moody. So hopefully I'll be telling some of those.

>> Ramon: Now, I read that Judy is at least somewhat inspired by you and your own childhood. I think you said in one place that in a sense, you are Judy Moody. How much of that is true, and what do your sisters think about the books?

>> McDonald: [Laughter] Well, growing up with 4 older sisters, as you can imagine with just 5 girls in our family, we have so many funny family stories, and so I took a lot of those stories that were true life things that happened with my sisters and wrote them down, and that became the first Judy Moody book. So probably of all the Judy Moody books, that's the one that has the most sort of true to life stories, and then Judy from there has kind of taken on a life of her own, but in every book there's always something that really happened to me with my sisters. So, and my sisters are big fans of the books, but it's very funny because they'll read a book and then call me up and correct me on something [laughter] and tell me, "That's not the way it happened. This is what really happened." So...

>> Ramon: But it's fiction, of course.

>> McDonald: Yeah, yeah. So of course there's always a huge dose of fiction in there as well as some exaggeration.

>> Ramon: Now you have made the character of Judy Moody as a third grader. Is there a particular reason for that? Do you think there's something especially interesting or entertaining about that particular age group?

>> McDonald: Well, I personally loved third grade. That was like one of my favorite years that I remember in school, and I just, I had a wonderful teacher that year, and I think third grade... I just loved third grade because kids that age are so creative in the way they think, and it's kind of like not too much of the world has been pressed upon them yet or something. So I think they're really smart at that age and curious and wide-eyed about everything, and they, you know, they know tons of information and want to learn a lot of facts and soak in information. So it's just the perfect age to set Judy Moody in, I think. Kids are funny for some reason at 8 years old and really have wonderful senses of humor. So, you know, as far as writing funny books, it's really gratifying to write for that age because they really get a lot of the Judy Moody humor.

>> Ramon: Now, Judy Moody, of course, as her name implies is a very moody young girl, but as you said the books are also very funny. So is it possible that you can write in a bad mood, and do your own moods really effect the way you're able to portray these characters in situations?

>> McDonald: Well, you know, one of the reasons I actually set the book in third grade is that I visit, you know, quite a lot of schools and I would go to bookstores and I'd be talking to kids and reading from my books, and I started to notice right around third grade, kids were asking me if I was ever in a bad mood, and could I write when I'm in a bad mood, and so that also kind of really contributed to it because it started me thinking that right around that age they're becoming aware of their

moods, you know, or if they're in a funk, they have a parent or somebody pointing out to them that they're in a bad mood, and they're thinking about moods. So I thought it would be wonderful to show a character who isn't always just completely funny and positive and upbeat. I mean, you know, bad things happen to all of us, and sometimes Judy has real disappointments and things that are very crushing to her or, you know, somebody else is better at something than she is, and so it puts her in a bad mood sometimes, not always. I mean, certainly she has a real range, you know, as we all do, of good and bad moods, but I thought it was really important to make her realistic to show that other side, you know, the side that has moods and to show kids that as a grownup, as a writer, yes, I do have disappointments and bad moods, and, you know, that that does effect something like your job or your writing or, you know, your whole outlook.

>> Ramon: Now your latest book, as we mentioned earlier, is called "Judy Moody and Stink and the Holly Joliday," and I understand that we're introduced to a new character who's a mailman [laughter] with a very interesting name. I wonder if you might maybe tell us a little bit about the book, and if there's a favorite passage or any passage that you'd like to share with us, we'd love to hear that.

>> McDonald: Oh, okay, that'd be great. Well, I, this goes back to years ago. I lived in Minnesota in the Twin Cities, and, of course, it's very cold and snowy there, and I lived just a couple miles from my sister, and my sister had a mailman, in fact she still does, whose name was Jack Frost, and we thought that was so hilarious that the guy who brings the mail through all the snow is named Jack Frost, and I kind of have never forgotten that. So I got kind of compelled or taken by this idea that it was Christmas time, and Stink, all he wanted for Christmas is snow, but they live in Virginia in the books. So I looked it up, and it hadn't snowed on Christmas day in Virginia for 100 years, and I thought, well that's even better because Stink has this passion that all he wants is snow, and Judy is kind of the naysayer like, "Yeah, right, you know, it hasn't snowed here for 100 years," but I also love showing the other side of Judy. So being really big hearted, she decides that she's going to try to have a role in bringing this about because she's really worried it's not going to happen and that Stink will be crushed. Stink, on the other hand, meets a new mailman and decides that maybe this guy can really help him out. So that's kind of the setup, and I'll just read a short part from the beginning that's from Chapter 1. It's called "Frosty the Mailman."

>> Ramon: Wonderful.

>> McDonald: Stink glued to the Weather Channel when out on the porch he heard such a clatter, thump, clunk. Stink sprang from the sofa to see what was the matter. "Mailman," he shouted with glee. "Somebody got a package." "Stink, I hope you didn't write more letters and order more free stuff," Judy called out to him. "Mom and Dad will be mad." "Nope," said Stink, opening the door and running down the walk to catch the mail truck before it pulled away. He liked talking to Mr. Harvey, the mailman. Mr. Harvey had a ponytail and a dog named Porkchop. "How's Porkchop?" Stink asked, but when the mailman turned around, it wasn't the mailman at

all. He did not have a ponytail, and he did not look like someone who had a dog named Porkchop. This guy had white, fuzzy hair and smiley wrinkles. He had a white, bushy beard and hairy eyebrows, and he wore a furry hat with the... with the earflaps turned up. He did not look like a mailman. "Who are you," asked Stink, "and where's Mr. Harvey?" "I'm the new guy," said the not-mailman. "Glad to meet you . My name's Frost. Call me Jack," said Mr. Frost grinning and winking and raising his bushy white eyebrows. "No way. You mean, you're Jack Frost, for real, like the snowman, like the guy that paints frosty pictures on leaves and windows?" "That's me," said the mailman, "and guess what happens when a dog bites me?" "What?" Stink asked. "I get frostbite," Jack said grinning. [Laughter] And Stink had to howl over that one.

>> Ramon: Well I heard even a hint of Clement Clark Moore in there.

>> McDonald: Yes.

>> Ramon: A very, classic, classic tale. So what do you think are the personality traits that go into making a good children's author?

>> McDonald: Well, of course, I think a sense of humor is really, really important because I think humor is something so universal that everybody, you know, child or grownup alike, really responds to. So that's been a really great pleasure for me and meeting my readers and reading for them because, you know, grownups and kids alike enjoy the books and find different things funny. So I think sense of humor is very important, and I think, you know, just a really strong sense of storytelling, you know, that everybody loves a good story. You know, I grew up in a house where my dad was an ironworker, and every night he'd come home. We'd wait dinner for him, and he would tell us a story, and even if it was just something from the day that happened to him, you know, we just loved that. So I think kind of recognizing that there's that universality in story, that that's something that really brings us together and just, you know, wanting to see ourselves kind of reflected in a story. If we can connect with the character of Judy Moody or Stink, then I think it helps us to learn something about ourselves.

>> Ramon: What do you think is the best part of your job, of being a children's author?

>> McDonald: Oh, gosh. Let's see. Well, there are many wonderful things, small things, such as, you know, I get to go to work in my pajamas. [Laughter] So that's one of my favorite things that I wake up and go upstairs and turn on the computer, and I get to... I always tell kids I get to stay up as late as I want. If I'm working on a book sometimes, you know, I'll be up until 1 or 2 in the morning. So those are some of the pleasures of the job, but I think, you know, probably most of all is making that connection with my readers. I mean there's just nothing more fulfilling and more wonderful than having a crowd of kids around you who are just so excited about your characters and your books.

>> Ramon: Do you have any particular memorable interactions with your readers? Any encounters that stand out in your mind?

>> McDonald: Oh, boy, there would just be... well, you know there are so many from the kids that are in my own family and the way they respond. I have a niece who lives in Minnesota, and she tries to be the first person in the country to read a Judy, the new Judy... whatever the newest Judy Moody book is. [Laughter] And, you know, to kids who are really basically strangers that come up to me in the grocery store and they've seen me at the school or something and they, you know, are kind of nudging their mom and telling her, "That's her. She writes Judy Moody." So, you know, those are always really fun moments when somebody discovers that it's you, and they know your work.

>> Ramon: Do you have any interest in writing in any other genres?

>> McDonald: Well, I love, you know, there's... I mean, I love poetry. There's so many kinds of books that I really enjoy myself, but I think if I ever do try to write something for adults, it would probably be a mystery. I'm a real mystery hound. That's kind of my fun reading. So sometimes I fantasize about that a bit.

>> Ramon: Now you mentioned a little bit about you set your own hours. You can stay up until 1 in the morning. Can you talk a little about your creative process? You say you write, you know, you start your stories on a napkin, but where do you go from there?

>> McDonald: Well, yeah, it always starts, you know, with sort of an idea that's scribbled on a scrap of something, and a lot of brainstorming goes into it before I ever even begin to write something down. So every book I have one of those, oh, kind of those 99 center composition notebooks with the hard covers, and, you know, they have kind of the ugly design on the front, and I just get a new one of those for each book, and I start to just kind of brainstorm all my ideas, and I usually fill up pages and pages, usually way more than ever will even fit into the book, which my editor could attest to because I'm always usually well over the word limit and have to kind of cut back. So a lot of thinking and brainstorming, and as I said, I'm a reader myself, so everything I pick up or read seems to kind of jump out and something will interest me, and that will kind of feed into what I'm thinking about. So I'm making notes for a long time. I actually do a lot of research. So if I'm going to be writing about, you know, if Judy Moody is going to go take a class at college, then I want to know how do college kids talk or what does a dorm room look like these days or something like that. Or if Stink is going to take a trip to Virginia Beach, I want to know what are some landmarks there that, you know, he might go to. So it's not all... it's not necessarily the traditional kind of research you think of, but I think just reading and filling myself up with a lot of, you know, things to kind of get me going, and then I try to... I'm not a really good outliner. So I try to sort of loosely plot things out, you know, where I want it to go, but of course as you've probably heard other writers say, there are always surprises along the way, and it takes you to places you hadn't really imagined. So, and then I just begin writing straight onto the computer. So I do type directly into the computer and write that way.

>> Ramon: Now aside from being a writer, you've had a number of past careers as well. Of course, as we mentioned, you have training as a

librarian, which, of course, is very close to our heart at the Library of Congress. You've also been a park ranger. How does your own past and your careers and experiences inform, and how are they reflected in your writing?

>> McDonald: Well, I think as a writer, everything you do, you know, all of your experiences are sort of filtered through that part of you that's the writer. So anything that happens to me, it seems to present itself in terms of ideas for a book or episodes for Judy Moody or Stink or something like that. I mean, sometimes there's a very direct connection like when I was a park ranger, I worked at Jamestown for several months and I worked at a trading post fort on the Santa Fe Trail, and I actually wrote whole novels that ended up using those settings. Like in Jamestown I wrote a mystery that used Jamestown as the setting, or I wrote a trail diary of a girl that traveled the Santa Fe Trail. So sometimes it could be very direct, you know, experience, but other times it's just anything that happens in my life or my family or everyday stuff, you know, all I think informs me as a writer. It's just a way of looking at the world.

>> Ramon: Do you have any favorite books or favorite authors of your own particularly from your youth?

>> McDonald: My favorite book growing up was when I was in about, I think I was about 9 or 10, I, you know, we've talked about growing up with all these sisters. Well, my mom would wait dinner until my dad got home and we'd sit around this big round table, and my sisters were older than me, and so they'd all be having these lively talks and discussions about, you know, their day or whatever they were thinking, and as the youngest I wasn't able to get a word in edgewise around the dinner table. So my sisters remember this, and they've told me I started to stutter when I was about that age, and my mom was trying to think of some way to help with the stuttering, and this was so smart of her, I think. She went out and she bought me what was then like the most popular book for kids, and it was "Harriet the Spy," and she brought it home. I remember the copy of "Harriet the Spy," and she gave me a little spiral notebook, and she said, you know, maybe like in the same way that Harriet would take her notebook everywhere and she was a reporter and an observer of people, my mom said, "Well, maybe this will, you know, encourage you to write things down," and that was really, taking that notebook was really the beginning of, you know, just starting to express myself through writing. So "Harriet the Spy" is probably the book that really stands out for me from my childhood.

>> Ramon: Now if we could talk for just a moment about another book of yours, "Ant and Honeybee, What a Pair." Ant and honeybee, they don't want to dress up like Pilgrims for yet another Halloween, and I've read that in your own youth, you had to wear your older sisters' hand-me-down Pilgrim costumes. Well, what did you really want to be for Halloween?

>> McDonald: [Laughter] Yes, that's a very big joke in my family where my sisters tease me because every, you know, my mom made these Halloween, these Pilgrim costumes, and my mother always worked full time when we were growing up, so she wasn't the most domestic of moms, and so this was a big deal that she had hand sewn these costumes, and, of course, I think

there were two of them, and my sisters, you know, quickly outgrew them, but there was always... it seemed like there was forever a Pilgrim costume that was always being passed down to me that I had to wear, but my idea was I wanted to be a banana split. [Laughter]

>> Ramon: With the actual dish and, you know...?

>> McDonald: I'm not sure I really had it worked out, but I just thought it would be cool somehow to make like a banana costume and have, you know, balls of ice cream or something stuck to it. So...

>> Ramon: Well, Megan McDonald, we've really appreciated your time. Can you tell us what is next for Judy Moody and Stink?

>> McDonald: Sure, well after the "Holly Joliday," Stink is going to be going on a road trip. He rescues 101 escaped guinea pigs, and he gets the pet store lady and his friends to help him, and they put all the guinea pigs in a camper, and they go on a road trip to Virginia Beach trying to find a good home for the 101 guinea pigs. So that's next up for Stink, and with Judy, her next adventure is she's going to go to college. She gets a tutor at school, and the tutor is a college student, and so at first she's very disgruntled that she has to do this, and then when she learns that she actually gets to go to a college campus, she gets very excited, and, you know, a lot of college things going on start to inform that book. So I'm looking forward to that one.

>> Ramon: I'm sure all of your readers are, too, and before we go, what is next for Megan McDonald?

>> McDonald: Well, next for me is something completely different. I have written 6 books that... for American Girl, and so they go with the newest character or doll that will be coming out with American Girl, and her name is Julie, and she's actually a girl of the 1970's, the setting of San Francisco. So it's more contemporary history than anything they've done before, and those will be launching in this September.

>> Ramon: Great. Well, Megan McDonald, once again, thank you, and we look forward to seeing you and your napkins at the National Book Festival. [Background music]

>> McDonald: Thank you so much.

>> Ramon: Thank you, and of course the National Book Festival, once again, is Saturday, September 29, on the National Mall from 10 am to 5 pm. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a list of participating authors you can visit www.LOC.gov/bookfest. I'm Matt Ramon for the Library of Congress. Thank you for listening.

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