

Quill and Ink Episode #09

Opening:

Hi, welcome to Quill and Ink, a podcast for book lovers where myself, Jenna Greene, and my cohost, Miranda Oh, interview authors from around the world. I am a YA fantasy writer, author of the Imagine Series and the dystopian thriller *Reborn*. Here to introduce herself and our guests (two of them) for today is my cohost, Miranda.

Miranda:

Hey everybody. My name is Miranda Oh. I am the author of the *Chin Up, Tits Out* series, and that is a contemporary chick-lit series filled with drama, love, and a dark, twisted sense of humor. A little friendly reminder to keep that chin up, tits out, attitude in life. Cause I mean, we all know life is going to be a wild ride, let's try to find positivity through it.

Now talking about positivity, I am super, super excited to introduce one of our guests. Then I'm going to let her introduce our second guest. Because this is an exciting time for Jenna and I. This is something that we haven't done before. Get to the point. Kelly Brakenhoff is an American Sign Language interpreter and writer from Nebraska. She writes children's books and mysteries. Cool combination. She also sits on the Board of Editors for the registry of entrepreneurs for the dead publication *VIEWS*. Yes, I need to re-read that. That was a mouthful. Jenna, can you help me out? I'm just too excited. I can't get it out right.

Jenna:

With Kelly today, she has brought another guest named Amy Willman. Kelly, why don't you go ahead and explain who you brought with you and why.

Kelly:

Thank you both for having us tonight. We're really excited to do this. This is the first time that we've done a video podcast. We're pretty excited. Like Jenna said, I wrote the children's book called *Never Mind*, and it's about Duke. He's a deaf dog, and sometimes people tell him, never mind, and he doesn't like it very much when people do that. A special thing that's in the book are pictures of Amy (who you can see on screen) and she's signing some of the words in the book in American Sign Language.

Amy works as an instructor for American Sign Language. I'm going to let her explain her job and what she does and how she helped me so much on this book. Go ahead.

Amy (interpreted by Kelly):

She says, hi, I'm Amy Willman and I work as an instructor in ASL at the University of Nebraska, - Lincoln. I've been there for about 19 years, and before that I taught at several colleges. I've been a teacher for 28 years total, and the main thing that I teach is American Sign Language. I'm really glad that Kelly wanted me to participate in signing the pictures for her book. I thought that was a pretty cool idea because that's my thing as an ASL instructor. I like teaching children and adults, letting them learn more about American Sign Language.

You don't have to become really good at ASL, but it can help you understand the basic culture and our approach to respecting Deaf people. The book *Never Mind* is a great way to help. It's got a lot of Deaf people's experience in it. Many times, that situation happened to me. People said, "Oh, I don't have to tell you that again, never mind. What I said wasn't worth it."



I'd tell them, "Hey, you know what? It doesn't matter if you think it's important or not. I want to know what people are saying."

That's why I'm excited about this book and being involved in it. There's different parts of the book. The first part is the pictures that are in the book with a one-word sign of each vocabulary word. We also include three videos that I made. The first one just has the vocabulary words and you can follow the pictures in the book. There's a second part of the book that has five meanings of how to say never mind in American Sign Language, and the third is the whole story.

Jenna:

That's amazing. I was telling Miranda before this episode that this is probably one of the ones I've been most excited about. I had an ASL student in my class last year and she had a sign language interpreter. It was interesting to see the dynamic between the student and her interpreter. How to encourage the other classmates to address the student and not the interpreter. We taught them about the uniqueness of the language of ASL, that it is a language, and the interpreter is someone not speaking *for* the student but interpreting.

It was amazing. She never held back. She played on the basketball team, I taught her about onomatopoeia in literature. The student was like, "But I don't know what these sounds are!"

But we overcame that challenge and we learned that, in literature, certain sounds have words, and she would be able to understand why those words were there. This year, I tried teaching my grade one students a bit of ASL. Obviously, I'm not an interpreter and I'm not trained in ASL. I just gave them an appreciation of this culture, and they are way faster learners than I am. Just like sponges. They learned their numbers too.

Amy:

Their brains are like sponges. They learn everything much faster than us. Yeah.

Jenna:

We sign and count every morning and every time I messed up, they would tell me. Thank you. Enough about me though. I really wanted to share that experience.

Kelly, as an ASL interpreter, how does that influence your writing in other ways? Obviously, you've spoken about the book, *Never Mind*, but how does it influence your writing as a whole?

Kelly:

Sure, thanks. The children's book has a lot of Deaf Culture and signs in it. Also, I've written two mystery novels, and both of those books have characters who are deaf and sign ASL. I include issues about how it feels when you're in a deaf student in college where most of the students in the college can hear.

The books describe how it works to sit in a classroom with an interpreter near the teacher. Just kind of helping people understand. It's not a big part of the book, but it gives people a little bit of an idea of how it feels to be the only person in the class who's deaf in college. Because it's different in college. You know, they like live in the dorms or the fraternities and the sororities. It's really different.

Jenna:

Mm-hmm. Because this student I had was starting middle school. And that idea that she wanted to break away from the interpreter to socialize with friends, but also needing the interpreter. I can see how that would be another leap in high school, and another leap when you get to college. How to be independent, but also have your needs met.

Miranda:

Yeah. Every big chapter change in your life is going to be met with this whole new hurdle of finding normalcy in your routine, right? That's cool that you were able to take your experience and direct it to a child audience and then directed into your mystery genre. You were able to kind of tailor that experience and throw it into two genres successfully. Kudos to you.

Kelly:

Well, thank you. But one more really interesting thing is you should ask Amy about college. She went to a college that had all deaf people, and it's really interesting.

Miranda:

[laughs] Was it really interesting when someone would just speak outward to you instead of signing there?

Amy:

Yeah. I'd like to back up a little. I was born deaf and everyone in my family can hear. I started off as a young child going to a school for the deaf. I never really experienced what a public school was like. I went to schools that had deaf people in them all the way from grade school up to college. In college, I went to Gallaudet University in Washington DC, and everyone, all of the students in the school were deaf. Everyone signed. Some adults that worked there were teachers that could hear or dorm staff that maybe didn't sign as much. But pretty much a hundred percent all the time people signed. What I mean is that I'm culturally Deaf and not just medically deaf.

Now, attending Gallaudet was great, but I'll tell you about one time when I was in grad school. For that semester, the class that I wanted, I had to take it immediately before I could graduate on time. I had to go take one class at the University of Maryland instead of Gallaudet. I thought, okay, well I'll go ahead and do that. But I had no conception of how to use an interpreter, or that the interpreter would be in front of the class. I'd seen it on TV before, but I'd never actually like attended class with an interpreter before. I sat there the first day and thought this will be no big deal.

I was wrong. Three hours later I'm still staring at this one person in class! You know, my eyeballs were about ready to fall out of my head! Compared to watching a teacher or an entire classroom when you can look all over while the teacher moves around. But just looking eyeball to eyeball with one interpreter for three hours. I thought I was going to die. I was like, I can't do this. I can't imagine doing this for a whole semester.

All of these other deaf students, who grew up all throughout elementary and high school mainstreamed in a classroom with an interpreter all day, every day. Wow, I cannot imagine how that would have worked. At first, I thought it was no big deal, and then I realized this is hard. Luckily it was only a three-week class, thank God. But once I did that, the rest of my career, I was like, no.

One quick little thing to mention related to the book Kelly wrote. I just want to tell you I wrote a book too together with my mom. It was called *Amy Signs*. My mother published it in 2012. The chapters go back and forth about my experience growing up and going to a Deaf school, and then my mother's experience having a daughter who was deaf in their family. It flips between the two experiences. It's a great book to show parents who have a deaf child what it's like from both perspectives.

We have to learn speech therapy and all that stuff. For me, learning how to speak didn't work. Some people, you know, your brain can do it, but for me that didn't work very well. It depends on what people can do. Some people can hear a little bit and then they can speak, but for me, I'm 100 percent deaf. Back in older days, perspectives change over time. For me signing was the way to go. For some

QUILL & INK'S MIRANDAH OH & JENNA GREENE
SPECIAL TWO-PART INTERVIEW WITH KELLY BRAKENHOFF & AMY WILLMAN:
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I REALIZED I COULD DO BOTH OF THE THINGS THAT I LOVE. I HAVE THE BOOKS WITH CHARACTERS THAT ARE DEAF AND USE ASL IN THE BOOKS. PLUS, I STILL GET TO INTERPRET BECAUSE THAT'S MY FIRST LOVE AND HANGING AROUND WITH DEAF PEOPLE IS FUN. I GET TO BE WITH GREAT PEOPLE LIKE AMY AND ALL OF OUR FRIENDS. - KELLY

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people speech is kind of like an additional thing that helps them get along in life better. But sign language is a great way to access everything.

Jenna:

What I heard, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, was that the student I had did not lip read or speak, but her parents did. I was told that in order to lip read and do some of the speaking, you need a little bit more life experience. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's why the parents could do some lip reading and things like that because they'd had enough life experience and background

knowledge in order to figure out what people are saying.

Amy:

Oh yeah, exactly. Some people like to lip read, but people ask me all the time, can you lip read? Or they'll say, can you understand me? I'll say, no. For example, I might catch two out of 20 words. Yeah, there's no way I'm going to get all of them.

If I'm talking with a person who can't sign, I'd rather just write notes back and forth cause then I know I'd really understand it. But lip reading for me, that's not really a thing.

Kelly:

Yeah. If you turn off your TV and say you're watching the news and you turn off the volume. Imagine how much you would understand.

Miranda:

You know what I do? I put on the closed captioning. Then I can listen to people if they're around or have a conversation. Read what's going on at the same time. I actually attempted to partially pick up another language by putting on the closed captioning. I did! Yeah, I definitely see value in that setting.

Amy:

Oh, sure. Also, it's good reading practice for kids to watch on TV. It's good for them to practice.

Miranda:

Yeah. Oh yeah, totally. I have a totally off topic question. They say when we are shy one sense that other senses are enhanced. Amy, I gotta ask what's your superpower sense?

Amy:

My eyes, my hand and eye coordination, my facial expressions. I can sign really fast.

Miranda:

Yes. You're expressive too. Even though I don't understand a lick of sign language other than *thumbs up*, I can still follow kind of where you're going. Which is fantastic from somebody who's a complete outsider in this world.

Amy

Your facial expressions for deaf people is kind of equivalent to your voice. You know how the tone of your voice moves up and down to show your emotions. For deaf people, if a person is signing with a completely straight face, that's boring. Like a monotone kind of voice. Then the more expression you have in your voice is similar to the more expression people have on their face. It's the same thing.

Miranda:

Yeah, totally. That's a perfect way to explain it. Because my tones go from all extremes, so does my volume and projection in my voice. I value that. It's so cool.

Amy:

A lot of people think if deaf people that sign is that, are they good? Do they really match what the person's saying in English? But I say yes, 100%. English and American Sign Language are equivalent. It's just a different way of expressing ourselves. But using our hands and faces, we can say everything that you can say in English. It's an equivalent.

Jenna:

Miranda, I have a question for you and then I'm going to see what you answer. Then we'll let these two ladies tell us the actual truth. In English, if we ask a question our tone goes up at the end.

Miranda:

Yes.

Jenna:

They can't do that. I know the answer because I worked with the student, but how do you think they show that they are asking a question?

Miranda:

[laughing] Question mark? No, I'm going to fail and I'm going to tell somebody something that I don't want to accidentally. I'm sorry.

Jenna:

Okay. We'll ask Amy and maybe she'll bail you out.

Amy:

It depends on what kind of question. Sometimes your eyebrows will go up and down and that shows, if you're asking a question. You might have to explain more about it, but sometimes it's in your eyebrows. That's one way that you can see that you're asking a question. Sometimes there's rhetorical questions, that's got a little different grammar.

Miranda:

This the whole world fascinates me. I know Jenna, why you are excited about this.

Amy:

I say this all the time to my students in my class. It's all in your face. If you just look at their face, it's all on there.

Miranda:

Okay, Kelly, let's turn this to you for a minute. When did you start writing and what got you into all of this world in the first place?

Kelly:

I started writing ever since I was a little girl. I always dreamed of becoming an author, but when I was in high school, I met some Deaf friends. I thought, Oh wow, I want to become friends with them. I learned some sign. Then in high school I took ASL classes. In college, I took more ASL classes. I majored in English in college, and I still thought I was going to write books, but you know, the world sometimes decides for you. Right?

Some people that mentored me encouraged me to become an interpreter. I started that job and I love interpreting. It's a great job. I get to work with really wonderful people all the time. I've met many deaf people and done many different jobs. When my youngest son got to high school age, I decided to pursue my original dream of writing books.

Then I realized I could use both of the things that I love. I have the books with characters that are deaf and use ASL in the books. Plus, I still get to interpret because that's my first love and hanging around with deaf people is fun. I get to be with great people like Amy and all of her friends.

Jenna:

You get the best of both worlds. That's right.

Kelly:

Amy, I have to say, I know this is off topic, but I love your wall behind you. Is that a mural or is that one of the virtual backgrounds?

Amy:

It's a wallpaper mural. I have a different decorating theme in each room.

Miranda:

Oh, like it makes me feel like I'm at the beach. Especially with all of this coronavirus and quarantine now, like anybody is wanting a little bit of outdoors beach time, right?

Amy:

Right now. In Nebraska, it's snowing. We have four inches of snow out the window. It's crazy. It's April! We're not supposed to have this. You guys are in Canada, right?

Miranda:

Yeah. I'm in prairies and we are in the minus Celsius. I am ready for spring, please.

Kelly:

Yeah, we are too. I guess we can't complain because it's colder there than here and we're kind of spoiled.

Miranda:

But you know, the snow and the cold weather does make it easier to stay at home, right? In this time, staying at home, keeping everybody safe and healthy is important. As much as I dislike the cold weather. Cool. Like if Mother Nature needs to continue to sort herself out, then praise me, girl.

Amy:

Yup. That's right. We just kind of have to just go with it, right?

Jenna:

Let's just talk a little bit more about the, the writing. I've heard you say that mysteries and thrillers are your favorite genres to read and write. I want to know why. Then I want you to tell me just a little bit more about your main character because you're writing with your *Death by Dissertation* series.

You've got a character that's being followed. I love that. I write series. I just want to hear a few things from your point of view about why you love that mystery genre and what it's like to write a series with the character that's going to appear in multiple novels. That was a lot of questions. Okay. Answer whichever one first.

Kelly:

[laughing] You're assuming that I can remember all of those, right? Okay, let's see. Growing up, I loved to read. I love to read everything from Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, mystery books, my favorite authors probably are like Sue Grafton and Janet Evanovich. I love those like series that kind of go on forever.

I'm really kind of sad that we didn't get the Z book in that alphabet books. Grafton stopped at Y, right? That was sad. I don't know if I want to write 26 books in my series. I have five already planned and I'm working on the third one right now. The main character is Cassandra Sato, and she grew up in Hawai'i. She follows her dream job in Nebraska. She moves from Hawai'i to Nebraska. Who does that right? No one does that. Especially now.

Amy:

Cassandra would be looking at my wall if she lived in Nebraska now.

Kelly:

That's right. I'll have to add that in in book three. She puts a mural in her office like yours. I'll have to copy that. Yeah, because Cassandra has a lot of adjusting to do because the culture here in Nebraska is different. There is mostly like white people here and it's just really different for her. But she really someday wants to become a president of a university. She feels this is the job that she has to take.

Jenna:

What is she like as a character? Is she shy? Is she feisty?

Kelly:

She's pretty strong. I mean, it takes like a brave person to move really far away from your home and your family. She's pretty brave and pretty funny. She has lots of friends that kind of surround her. She's got a friend that's an interpreter. Yes, I put an interpreter in the book, of course. She has really funny student workers. You said that you teach, right? And I know Amy, you have student workers in your office, right? Sometimes the students do funny things just because they're young. I put all of those stories in my book about the funny students.

Amy:

Oh yeah. Teaching college kids from 18-to-24 that age group is great. I love them. It's fun to play with them. I remember back at my days in college and all the stuff that we did. It's really fun. I bond with them over that.

Kelly:

My main interpreting jobs are in college, and I used those experiences that I have every day in my job. I work with faculty, staff and students in the university. I put those experiences in the books. I think a college setting is like the perfect situation with the politics, the competition, the faculty and the backstabbing and everything, right?

Miranda:

It is a big crock pot of stuff of great book ideas and scenarios is just college. Like you can go at it any way and there's many interesting angles.

Jenna:

A bunch of people that are underslept, underfed.

Miranda:

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Then, then you add ASL. Whoa.

Amy:

Right, you know, time management. Oh my gosh. Their time management. They have no responsibility. Can we procrastinate? No big deal. But that's just real life, right?

Miranda:

Oh, totally. It's messy. Those years are creative and exploratory.

Jenna:

No wonder the book ends up as a mystery. The natural, it's a mystery.

Kelly:

There's actually a lot of humor in the book too. Yeah.

Miranda:

Oh, that is awesome. That is awesome. We've reached our time for today, please tell our guests. Well, no, you are our guests. Sorry. Can you please tell our listeners and our watchers-- (My bad, it's Friday somewhere.) Where they can find your work. We would love to share it with our listeners and watchers.

Kelly:

Sure. The mystery books are both on Amazon and they're in Kindle Unlimited. You can read them for free if you sign up for Kindle Unlimited. I know now they're having a two-month free trial where you can sign up and download all the books you want onto your Kindle. Or you can buy the paperbacks anywhere.

Then the children's book you can buy that anywhere like Kobo, Amazon, Barnes and Nobles, all that.

Last week, I can give you the link to post on my YouTube channel. I posted a video of Amy and me doing a story reading of *Never Mind*. There's so many parents and teachers that are home and they're looking for resources for the children. I'm doing the English reading and then Amy does the signs.

We posted that last week. I'll give you the link and people can watch it for free. I mean, you can buy the book too, so you have one at home. You can watch it online. Amy does such a good job telling the story.

Miranda:

Awesome. With her facial expressions, I'm very much looking forward to it. We will post the link in the description of this episode. Thank you to our beautiful guests, Miss Kelly and Amy and my wonderful cohost, Ms. Jenna Greene. Thank you. To all of our listeners, you can find my work at mirandaoh.com or [#chinuptitsout](https://twitter.com/chinuptitsout).

Jenna:

I would just like to say I'm extremely proud of myself for understanding every 40th sign. That's where I am at in my level. Just a quick thanks to all our listeners, to Creative Edge publicity and to Authors on the Air global network. Thank you to everyone and have a great day.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and to remove the thousands of filler words that we didn't realize we used so we don't drive readers crazy.