**Between our pages**

Episode 8 with Sean E Avery

[0:00] Music.

[0:10] Welcome, you're listening to Between Our Pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.  
This episode was recorded on Whadjuk Noongar land. We acknowledge the traditional custodians and pay respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging.

My name is Fiona Bartholomaeus, and together we'll be diving into the wonderful world of books and reading right here in WA.

Today, we're chatting with Sean E. Avery, author, illustrator, and art teacher, about his newest graphic novel called 'Friendly Bee and Friends'.

Let's go!

[0:39] Music.

[0:47] Fiona: 'Friendly Bee and Friends' is a new graphic novel full of friendship, mischief, adventure, and kindness. It follows Friendly Bee and his attempts to become friends with every bug he meets, despite the reluctance of some of them.

It's the latest publication from award-winning illustrator, artist, and teacher, Sean E. Avery.

Sean, thanks so much for joining me.

Sean: Oh, it's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

Fiona: So you're a sculptor and illustrator and a teacher. How do you combine all those things with being an author?

[1:15] sean: Being a teacher is sort of my main profession. I work Monday to Thursday teaching arts, primary school art from years two to six. And then the writing, it fits in the morning, before school, I'm up really early so I do all my writing, do my drawing then.

And then I have all of Friday to just concentrate on the writing and the illustrating and then on the weekends, I will get, you know, my mornings plus a few extra hours here and there.

So, it's really just about making books in the gaps for me.

Fiona: So, tell us about your newest book, 'Friendly Bee and Friends', what inspired it and what is it about?

Sean: So, 'Friendly Bee and Friends' is about a little bee named Friendly Bee and he is this cheerful optimist who just loves everyone and everything, every bug he meets and his best buddy is a character named Angry Wasp who is sort of the polar opposite of him and he's a real grump and he doesn't really like anything and Bee kind of follows Angry Wasp around trying to cheer him up and it just kind of gets in the way and annoys him.

So if you think about maybe the dynamic that Spongebob and Squidward have, that's pretty much what they've got going on.

And it's broken up into four parts. So four little stories and they're all kind of connected.

[2:31] The first story, Bee meets Angry Wasp and then the second story, Bee meets a character called The Slightly Peckish Caterpillar, which is, you know, obviously a take on the famous Eric Carle's Very Hungry Caterpillar. And then they meet the enormous hairy spider who tries to drink their internal organs, so she's a bit of a monster, and in the end the last one they meet, a character called the Fabulous Butterfly.

So it's sort of introducing a different bug friend in each part, and then it's all kind of interspersed with fun facts about insects, about bugs and bees and wasps, and it's just a really light-hearted, fun story. Just really fun, really silly.

And it's really bright, we've got this..

Fiona: It's very bright, a lot of yellow in the book.

Sean: Oh, tons of it. Yeah, it's, I'm quite impressed with the printing job on this one. So, usually these graphic novels are just, you know, black and white on really kind of cheap paper, but this one is printed on really, really nice paper that makes the blacks really intense and the yellows really intense. And of course, we all know black and yellow, great colour combination, you know, so it really pops off the page and, yeah, I'm very, very proud of this little book.

It's my first graphic novel for older kids. I'm sort of, before this, I've always done picture books. So, it's, yeah, it's a new territory for me, but the response has been really good and kids seem to like it and grown-ups seem to like it. So, I'm, yeah, I'm pretty happy with it. The second one's out in October, October the 3rd.

Fiona: Oh, wonderful.

Sean: Yeah, so fingers crossed they both sell well and I get to make 20 more after this.

[4:15] Fiona: So what made you decide to choose a bee and a wasp as the two main characters of the books?

Sean: Well, a couple of reasons. I just love bugs. I find them really fun to draw, and because they are always sort of flying in the sky, it's really, really easy to draw because there are no backgrounds, which I get really stuck on.

When I'm doing my drawings, I'm not really a background guy. I quite like drawing characters and I find I kind of get a bit exhausted if I have to draw lots and lots of backgrounds. So flying characters was really helpful and yeah I just, I've always kind of thought of bees as being friendly characters. Everyone loves bees. Everybody hates wasps, you know?

So I liked the idea of creating, you know, using these two very kind of similar insects, but with very different kind of personalities.

That idea really appealed to me.

Fiona: Speaking of the characters and their personalities, they made me laugh. I enjoyed them so much, especially Angry Wasp and some of his quips back to Friendly Bee. How important is humour in your stories?

Sean: Oh, it's pivotal. It's central to everything.

Even if I tried to, I don't think I could write serious stories, every time I have tried, I've always, you know, because I love all kinds of stories I love funny stories and serious stories. And anytime I've ever tried to write something serious.

[5:41] I've always had to make jokes so I've just kind of embraced that now and that's sort of my thing. I just make silly jokes. It fits my personality and what I'm comfortable with.

So yeah, definitely, definitely love the banter back and forth between the two, and I kind of, there's almost a little bit of mean-spiritedness, you know, with Angry Wasp. And I love that Angry Wasp can just say the most awful, horrible things, but Bee will always kind of kill him with kindness and always be this friendly ray of sunshine.

I just, yeah, for me, that cracks me up. I love that.

Fiona: And always kind of bounces back after every single comment or very much looks at the optimistic side of life.

Sean: Absolutely, yeah, which is great. I mean, I guess I wish I, you know, I'm sure we wish we were all like that, you know, we could just put a smile on and just ignore it for what it is, you know, and that's sort of what Bee's all about, just yeah, finding the good in everything.

[6:36] Fiona: And this book is already on the shelves in quite a number of bookstores and online too. Why should people pick up your book and give it a read?

Sean: Well, it's number one, really, really fun to read. It's got a lot of great jokes, a lot of great facts in it for kids. So it's not just kind of a barren wasteland where you won't learn anything.

There's a lot of, I guess, lessons to be learned in there about friendship and it's really easy to read. So a kid could pick up this book and it's 154 pages long, right? And they could easily read it in a day, which is really great for building up reading stamina.

You know, it's not like a chapter book of the same size where so many words would kind of maybe discourage a young reader or someone who's just transitioning from picture books to novels, right? This is sort of the perfect in-between step between that picture book and that longer sort of novel, and of course, it's a series as well, so you can continue to follow these characters across a number of books and a number of stories.

[7:46] So, yeah, I definitely think it'll entertain and inspire and almost sort of start off a lifelong love of reading slightly bigger books, you know, for older kids.

Fiona: And a lot of your books feature animals as their main characters. Why is that?

Sean: Because I can't draw people. Well, I can, but I'm not very good at it. I love drawing animals just because it's really, really easy to stylize them and to do really fun things with them.

And I just enjoy it more drawing animals.

I've got ideas for books for people and I'm sort of work-shopping a few of them. I've got my first little book that has people in it coming out in 2026, it's called 'Violet McQueen Stole a Meerkat from the Zoo', which is all about a little girl, a 10-year-old named Violet who steals a meerkat from the zoo and tries to hide it from her parents. So, that's, and I've written that all and I've done the drawing, like the first few drawings for that.

So, that's my first official book with people in it. So, pretty excited about that, I'm kind of nervous to actually do the drawings for that one because, yeah, that's really going to test my skills there.

Fiona: And with your books, what comes first when you're writing it? Is it the art or is it the words and the written portion? How do you tackle it?

[9:12] sean: It depends on what type of book I'm doing. So generally with picture books, I will write a story and then add pictures to it later.

A book like 'Friendly Bee and Friends', so the way I wrote this one is I wrote it a page a day for however many days it took. So this book is 154 pages, it took me about 154 days to write.

So what I would have a little notebook, a little sketchbook, and I would sketch out, I didn't like have an overall narrative arc in my head, I would literally just advance the story, the next step in the conversation on each page.

So just draw the basic pictures and, the little speech bubbles and everything, you know, being a comic. And then that's how I did it, and that's happened with all my graphic novels, actually, that I've written they've always, the words and the pictures have sort of grown up together at the same time.

So yeah, it's very different it just really depends all on the type of book you're making. A lot of picture books are also obviously quite visually driven so if it's more visually driven, you might do pictures first and then words later, if you've got a strong idea of what the pictures should look like.

[10:24] But yeah, a great adventure the whole process.

Fiona: It kind of sounds like the books really shape how you write it as well.

Sean: A hundred percent. Yeah, absolutely.

Fiona: Now, you're a teacher as well. Do you ever get inspiration for your stories and characters from things your students do in your classes?

Sean: All the time. It's kind of my main source of inspiration, the kids that I have in my class.

I had one little girl a few years back come to me with a picture of a duck with a little detective's hat on and it just had Ducky the Spy written on it. And I was, I looked at it and this whole idea just blew up in my mind instantly, you know, it's one of those times, it very rarely does this kind of inspiration strike where you can just see everything.

And I said to this young lady, what are you doing? Who is this? What is this duck's story? What are you going to do with it? She said, Oh, it's just a duck I just drew it for the sake of it.

And I said, can I please write a story about this duck? And she said, yes. And I have, I wrote a graphic novel about a duck called Ducky the Spy and basically he is a little duck who's a spy on a farm for a boss named Mr. Pig, who's this controlling narcissist who wants to know everything that's happening on his farm and Ducky's kind of his agent, but Ducky's a bit of a goof.

And so I wrote a graphic novel and it was picked up as a, you know, something that's gonna be published. So that's out next year.

Fiona: Oh that's awesome.

Sean: Yeah, and of course, you know, obviously worked really closely with my student on this one, you know, checking if she was all good with this and like, it's been really exciting getting her feedback on some of the stuff that I've been doing.

So it's definitely, yeah, I definitely get inspiration from my kids and yeah, just classroom situations and the random things kids say.

And I always pay attention to what they're reading and what they're laughing at and the movies that they're enjoying you know, I'm really intensely interested.

So yeah, lots of inspiration from the kids that I work with.

Fiona: Do you test out your books with your students or do they give you feedback on any of your work?

Sean: It's hard, you know, because if you read the dictionary to kids in an enthusiastic way, they're gonna think it's the greatest book ever written. Right? Like it's all about the delivery.

So I have done like occasionally I've shown them stuff that I've been working on because they are interested. They'll ask me what's happening at the moment. What are you, and I'll show them preliminary sketches or, you know, snippets and chapters that I'm working on.

And it's hard to get feedback from them because they're all, kids are so kind and so lovely, none of them are going to say, well, that's rubbish and you should, you should work on that.  
Or the shading's not quite right there or the lighting's not correct or your pros are a bit stagnant here or something like that.

Fiona: Not critical feedback.

Sean: No, not critical enough. No, they've, definitely go to them if you need to be pumped up by, like if you want to have your tires blown up by them because they will, they'll say that everything you do is great because yeah, kids are the best. They're so kind and lovely and sweet.

So yeah.

Fiona: With the Premier's Reading Challenge underway for 2023, how important has reading been in your life?

[13:37] sean: Oh, it's been kind of central to everything, you know, my dad is a, he's a journalist so he's worked in newspapers his whole life and I used to go to work with him, you know, so I've been around journalists my entire life, even where newspapers have been printed and stuff. So I've always been really interested in the process and I've always loved stories in any form, whether that's books or TV shows or movies or video games or anything like that but, books are somewhere that I've found that I can contribute, you know, because I can write and I can draw and I can design. So, it's definitely been just really important and central to my life.

[14:21] When I had my first book published, that's when I discovered how much I enjoyed working with kids, drawing and writing and doing all that stuff with them, so that's when I got into teaching.

So yeah, if it wasn't for books, I wouldn't have found teaching and books have done amazing things for me.

Fiona: It's always interesting how books can put you on a different path in life or spark inspiration for different roles that you never would have thought.

Sean: Absolutely. And I mean, everything, every piece of self-improvement or experience that I've never been able to have, have come from books, you know, amazing books like 'The Girl with Seven Names' or whatever, you know, about a North Korean defector, you know, those are, that's an experience that I would never have been able to have on my own, you know.

So to be able to get to into the head of someone who's gone through something crazy, crazy like that, dangerous or whatever, you know, you can, it builds your empathy and it builds your awareness of the world and what's happening and how lucky you are to be where you are, there's just, I mean, yeah, you could go on and on and on how books improve people's lives.

They're just central to everything, the linchpin of society, really, I think.

Fiona: Now, before we let you go, I'm going to ask you a couple of rapid-fire questions. I just want the first answer that comes into your head.

Sean: Ooh, okay.

Fiona: What is your favourite book?

[15:45] sean: 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' I don't know why, that's the first novel I ever read so that's the one that jumps into my head.

Fiona: It's a good one. What are you reading at the moment?

Sean: 'Where the Crawdads Sing'.

Fiona: Non-fiction or fiction?

Sean: Non-fiction.

Fiona: Favourite genre?

Sean: Horror.

Fiona: And in the spirit of the Premier's Reading Challenge, how many books do you hope to read in 2023?

Sean: 27.

Fiona: I like that. Nice number.

Sean: That's two audio books a month plus the three that I managed to read in my own time, like actual books that I read because I'm a bit hard-pressed. Actually, I mean, I probably read a heap more than that, right? Because of all the picture books that I read so if you're including picture books and graphic novels well then it's closer to 200.

[16:33] Music.

[16:43] Fiona: You've been listening to Between our pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

Thanks to our guest Sean E. Avery for joining me on this episode.

If you want to keep up to date about future podcast episodes, you can follow the Premier's Reading Challenge Facebook and, Instagram pages at Premier's Reading Challenge WA.

Thank you for listening, happy reading, we'll see you next time.

[17:03] Music.