**Between our pages**

Episode 2 with Chenée Marrapodi

[0:00] Music.

[0:10] Fiona: 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 Chenée Marrapodi, a journalist, podcaster and now a children's, book author who is getting ready to release her debut novel in July. Let's go!

[0:39] Music.

[0:46] Fiona: One Wrong Turn is a new coming-of-age story about passion, jealousy, friendship and dancing.

As Amelia, a young ballerina on the rise, tries to outshine her new rival, is the debut novel written by journalist Chenée Marrapodi and it combines her passion for words and love for dancing.

Chenée, thank you for joining me.

Chenée: Thank you so much for having me.

Fiona: So you're a journalist, a podcaster, and now you've added author to that list. It's your first children's book. What made you decide to write one?

Chenée: I was that kid who, when I was 11, 12 years old, I was in the school holidays writing my own book and that was my idea of fun. So I'd be writing a chapter each day and getting mum to edit the chapter each morning over a coffee and I just, from that moment, always knew that one day I wanted to add author next to my name. I did at the time think it was quite realistic at that age to do it, and I did get my first rejection from Fremantle Press, it was now my publisher. when I was 13.

Fiona : Oh, so you did submit something back then?

Chenée: Yes, I did submit it.

The Rebel Writers it was called, which is quite a big leap from where this book is.

But it's just funny now to do that, I guess, full circle and go back to Fremantle Press and now say, yes, okay, this one's an acceptance.

Fiona: So tell us about One Wrong Turn, what is the story about?

Chenée: So it's set against the backdrop of an elite dance academy and it follows two girls as they go head-to-head for the lead role in Cinderella. And one of those girls, Amelia, is extremely talented, she's driven, and she's determined to be a professional dancer just like her parents were. And she's, I guess, the hardest working dancer in the academy and she takes it very, very seriously and she's a shoo-in for the lead role until new competition comes along.

And that competition is Valentina, and she's freshly arrived from Italy.

So while Amelia's greatest challenge really is achieving perfection, Valentina's trying to navigate a new country, a new language, and a family who doesn't really understand the demands of ballet.

And amongst all of this, there's one big lie that gets told that has the potential to ruin everything.

 [2:49] Fiona : So what were some of the inspirations for this story? I know you have a bit of a background in dancing too.

Chenée: So I've grown up dancing my whole life. Full disclaimer, never with the potential of these girls to be a professional, just, competitively and really just a lot of fun as far as exercise goes. And I just really wanted to explore the athleticism that is behind dancing. I always found growing up that there was sport and there was dance and the dance kids, no one really understood them properly and they just kind of thought everyone was just prancing around and having a bit of fun and it was, oh, don't you want to play a team sport? Don't you want to learn about what it takes to be in a team?

And the most ironic thing is that people don't appreciate how much teamwork goes into putting a dance production together. And I mean, I remember us being sick as kids and unless we were really on our deathbed, you would have to go along to dancing and sit there and and take notes and I don't think people really understand that. And that continued into adulthood, because I mean, once you start dancing, you speak to a lot of dancers, you don't give it up.

I do it casually still now, and I still love it just as much as I did as a kid. And I remember a colleague once saying to me, oh, aren't you a little old to be going to a dance class? And no one ever says that to somebody who's playing mixed netball or soccer or something like that. It's just, oh, you play sport for exercise.

And so I really wanted to explore this idea that ballet is so much more than tutus and tiaras, it's not just sequins and all of that fun stuff. Dance is an athlete and there's so much that goes into it and that was really part of this book.

[4:21] Fiona : Did you find you were writing in some of your experiences from when you were younger, but also now into the book for dancing?

Chenée: One hundred percent. There's a teacher in the book, Miss Lily, and I would be lying if I didn't say she was a culmination of every dance teacher I've ever had through the years, because it has played such a huge part in my life and I have to say the determination that I have now that I put towards other projects that I work on has probably largely come from dancing and growing up and that attitude that you have when you're in a dance class that, you do try and strive for perfection and you work really, really hard to make goals actually come to happen.

Fiona: That's one thing I definitely think of when I think about dancers just always striving for perfection and just their work ethic, so I can totally understand that.

Chenée: I mean it's not always, I guess, to a healthy level I think that perfection can go too far, which it does to some point in this book, One Wrong Turn, but I think a lot of the skills and the attributes that you obtain in a dance class do transfer into everyday life.

Fiona: And some of those dance moves are rather technical for ballet dancers. How did you go about breaking it down for a younger audience?

Chenée: Well, I did have to be really careful and mindful of that because I wanted those terms to be in there. I wanted it to feel like you were inside a dance class and that it was real.

I wanted them in there, but I also didn't want to make any child or adult, if an adult picks it up, anyone reading it that didn't have a dance background. I didn't want them to have to stop and go, I don't know what's happening here.

So I've tried to include the terms in there, but in a descriptive way that people, if they don't really understand the exact dance move, they can just continue along and enjoy the movement.

Fiona: Why should people read your book?

[6:02] Chenée: I think to get an understanding of dance, but also it goes beyond that. My other character, Valentina, she's also navigating a new country and she shares, I'm Italo-Australian, half of my family is Italian from the south, and part of that experience has gone into her character. So while on the surface level it is a dance story and about girls who are battling it out on the dance floor, there's this underlying storyline that goes in and it really looks at culture and identity and this pressure, I suppose, to a place in the world. So even if someone's not a dancer, there is nothing stopping them picking this up because I think they're going to get something from it in any way.

Fiona: I do like that both the girls are going through their own challenges, despite the fact that, they're quite different, they still have all the different things that they're trying to tackle each day.

Chenée: Definitely, and it really looks at pressures and I suppose the expectations we often think other people have about us that are quite often just our own expectations on ourselves, which both of these girls are grappling with.

Fiona: So you are also a mother now. Why is it important for children and students to read books on such a wide variety of topics like ballet and dancing?

Chenée: I think just to gain an understanding and I mean, I probably didn't really understand that, the variety of reading different genres and different styles of writing until I became an adult and actually through my own podcast being forced to read outside of my natural genre.

I think you speak to a lot of adults and they'll naturally gravitate towards what they enjoy to read, whether it's a crime novel or romance, whatever it might be. And you can just learn so much about the world by stepping outside. And sometimes I think when you're looking at kids in particular, they're learning so much at school and that's great. And that's obviously a very important education. But sometimes by reading, you can get a real understanding of the world in a different sort of way without it feeling like homework. You can lose yourself in a world that's so different to where you are actually at in life and I think that's why it's really important to, I guess, definitely not force a child to read outside what they're naturally gravitating towards, but encourage them and just put the book there and hopefully they'll notice it and pick it up.

Fiona: Yeah, even like reading fantasy or a non-fiction book, they can still relate to certain aspects of it and take that into their day-to-day life and even into education and schoolwork.

Chenée: Exactly, and I just love that about reading and I think that's why I was such a passionate reader and writer from a young age because I liked this idea that I could make sense of the world by reading. I could write things and write about experiences that perhaps were different to what I was living but I could explore that idea. I could ask the questions of what if and I mean that's what writing is. It's asking what if and being curious and exploring that little bit further outside the door.

Fiona: And now your book One Wrong Turn, you actually rewrote everything you had for this book in 2019 during the National Novel Writing Month. Can you tell us about that mammoth of a task?

Chenée: This seems to be my natural writing style. I get a product that I think is really polished and ready and then I have an 'aha' moment where I think it would be better if I rewrote the whole thing and change something. And the old version of One Wrong Turn, I can confidently say the writing was good but there was just something that was missing. And there was a secondary character in the book at the time who had an Italian background and she just always seemed to come to life. Any scene that she was in was just a really fun scene. And I thought, you know, I understand this character because it's really similar to my own background.

So what happens, that question of what if, what happens if we pull her front and centre and kind of bring that colour onto the page? And because there wasn't really a big storyline to explore with her, I thought I'd take it one step further. And I thought, what happens if we make her an Italian migrant? And I mean, I haven't migrated to Australia, but I lived in Italy for just over a year and while I was there I danced at a school. Not professionally, just still. I was there every single night of the week and they became like a family.

But I had these interesting challenges with language where I'm quite fluent in Italian, but all of a sudden when music was playing and I was concentrating on choreography, I just couldn't translate anymore. So the teacher would be yelling corrections and I just have no idea what she was saying. And so I thought, what happens if this girl comes to this country and she's in a dance school and that's a similar experience as she's facing with language. But also what happens if she wants to pursue dance professionally? And the Southern Italians in particular, and I'm talking about a little town that my family comes from, is kind of the inspiration behind her family background. So I'm not speaking for the whole of Italy, but the Southern Italians have this really strong focus on family and tradition, and it's beautiful, but they're very, very set in their ways. And it's not really common for a young girl to pursue a career in dance particularly.

So I thought what happens if this young girl comes and you know she's grown up dancing and she decides to take it to that next level, how's her family going to deal with that when she comes to a new country and they're already trying to get their head around that and all of a sudden their daughter wants to be at dancing all the time and she wants to be the lead role and she wants to be at ballet when she should be at family functions and that sort of thing. And all of a sudden, when I put this Valentina in the story it just popped. The whole story just came to life, and I think it was because there was that colour that came from me, I could picture what the family was like and I knew what the language struggle was like, and having that lived experience just took the book, I think, to a whole new level.

Fiona: And I love that it all stems from just a month where you decided to take on this challenge, but also just a side character that you realised just did really well in the scenes that they were there for.

Chenée: Definitely, and I did pick it for, you mentioned NaNoWriMo, which is National Novel Writing Month in November, and the aim is to write 50,000 words in a month. And I really set that as my goal, just because I knew the novel itself was around 50,000 words at the time.

[12:14] And there's such a community spirit that goes along with NaNoWriMo and I thought, if I'm going to do this, I want to have a goal. I want people cheering me on, and I want to cheer other people on with their projects as well. And it becomes a little bit addictive, it makes it a game then, rather than homework.

Fiona: Did you have to have a certain number of words or little targets to hit?

Chenée: If you want to do NaNoWriMo, there's something like 1,800 words a day that you need to do, give or take but I really was just powering through, knowing that I just needed to get to the end of the book, because Amelia's chapters were already there and they needed strengthening and I needed to tie Valentina into them and inadvertently, Amelia's story did change slightly when Valentina came into the picture, but it was just powering through and tying the two together. So because I knew exactly where the story was going, it was really just telling Valentina's story and letting that unravel onto the page.

[13:07] Fiona: Now, the Premier's Reading Challenge is almost back for its second year. How much has reading helped you with your writing?

Chenée: Oh, so much. I don't think you can be a writer without being a reader. And it's one of those things that, through my podcast, I'm interviewing other authors all the time and I always ask them what their biggest tip for writing is and their biggest tip is always read, read, read and it goes without saying you wouldn't go and apply for a job without doing your homework. So you can't be a writer without reading other books and finding out how really good authors do it, what works, what doesn't.

I read a lot of middle grade which is what One Wrong Turn is because I need to know what kids are doing and what they're into these days.

I still think back to when I was a kid and how I did things and sadly that's really different to what kids are doing now and they don't talk in the same way. So I think for kids as well like, if they do have a passion for writing they're usually the kids that are reading a lot and I laugh now because I think of my mum when I was a kid and I was literally every spare window, I was nose in a book. And I remember her saying, put the book down, have a break. And now I laugh at that so much because I'm like, could you imagine like, don't you want your kid to read all the time? I think it's just such a joy.

Fiona: And just to finish, we just want the first answer that comes to your head with this next set of questions. What is your favourite book?

[14:27] Chenée: At the moment, I'm going to stick with middle grade while we're talking about it.

I am a huge fan of Nova Weetman and her book The Edge of Thirteen is just absolutely brilliant. So if you have a kid around that kind of 10, 11, 12, Edge of Thirteen.

Fiona: So this kind of leads into my next question, what are you reading at the moment?

Chenée: At the moment I'm actually reading a memoir called Pardon My French by Rachael Mogan McIntosh.

Fiona: Non-fiction or fiction?

Chenée: Fiction.

Fiona: Favourite genre?

Chenée: Psychological thrillers, which is not good for somebody who's very anxious and highly caffeinated all the time.

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

Fiona:  Oh, I'm usually a book a week or a book a fortnight person, so I'll say between 45 and 50. See how we go.

Fiona: I love that.

[15:17] Music.

[15:26] Fiona: You've been listening to Between Our Pages, a Premier's Reading Challenge WA podcast.

Thanks to our guest Chenée Marrapodi 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. See you next time.

[15:46] Music.