**Between our pages**

Episode 9 with Aśka

[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 Aśka, comic maker, visual literacy advocate and ex-quantum physicist about her latest graphic novel, 'Stars in Their Eyes'.

Let's go!  
  
[0:38] Music.  
  
[0:45] Fiona: 'Stars in Their Eyes' is a beautiful graphic novel about friendship, acceptance, and the importance of representation, as it follows Maisie at her first ever fan convention. It's an award-winning publication co-produced by passionate artist, comic maker, and visual literacy advocate, Aśka.

Aśka, thanks for joining me.

Aśka: It's an absolute pleasure, thanks for having me.

Fiona: You're a visual storyteller, a comic maker, science communicator, and an ex-quantum physicist. I love all of that, that's such an interesting list of titles and things you can do.

Aśka: Yeah, it sounds good, but I guess it just happened. I follow my passions and I suppose that's the result of doing that, and I would certainly recommend that for anyone.

Fiona: Has writing and art always been a passion of yours, even when you've been doing the more science side of life?

Aśka: I think storytelling is probably what's driven me through life and I think the reason I got into sciences is because my science teacher in high school would tell us stories about the scientists and their lives and how their inventions or discoveries made a difference.  
  
[1:50] And that really naturally was like a language that attracted me to sciences. And I ended up doing physics at a university and following that path but even when I was doing that I would try to explain some of the more advanced kind of science behind it to my friends and family who were not versed in that language with cartoons and little stories.

And yeah, I think it was always with me. I would help other people illustrate their thesis and eventually I decided that, you know, storytelling was too strong of a power and I kind of left to research to follow that dream but it took me a while to kind of get to where I am now. I've meandered a little bit. Which I'm happy about.

Fiona: It's fun because people often think storytelling is exclusive to writing, comics, graphic novels, just the arts in general, but it's everywhere, like learning about the history of scientists and how different formulas and everything came to be in the different technology that you use.

Aśka: Yeah, absolutely. I think we assimilate information as humans through stories, you know we make sense of the world and even the abstraction and complexity that is around us. It makes sense to us because there's a narrative in our head, and also in terms of just being in a world and being a person communicating with others, problem solving, storytelling abilities is what's gonna get you through all that. And I think we've learned it very early on in school and we appreciate it and we try to hone those skills in kids.

You know, it doesn't have to be writing and perfect spelling or amazing artwork it's some sort of mixture of that and being an actor and being a singer and being a performer and telling jokes, all of those things are part of storytelling and the way that you kind of click with the world, I think.

Fiona: So tell us about the most recent novel you worked on with Jessica Walton, 'Stars in Their Eyes'.

Aśka: It's such a great project to be part of. I was approached by Fremantle Press who wanted to develop their first YA graphic novel project and they had the short story by Jessica Walton which was basically like a tiny little nugget of 'Stars in Their Eyes' and they showed it to me and said 'what do you think?' and I was like 'yes absolutely' and from there on, I think it was like an interesting journey. 

Jessica rewrote the story as a play manuscript so it was like 90% dialogue.

Fiona: That's interesting.

Aśka: Yeah and it was really cool because it was dialogue so it was very, very rich character development. You could really feel the characters on a page because they had so much space to talk and some, you know, minimum stage instructions and my job was to take all that and then re-imagine it as a visual kind of experience that you will have reading the comic. 

And of course, this is for teens. So you don't want two heads talking. So my challenge was, how do I make these conversations really exciting? How do I make them leap off the page? How I make you engage with it? And that was great, that was such a great agency that I had there because no one really told me what to do. I just took it away and, you know, my months later I brought the kind of thumbnails and then we worked with the finalists, but it was such a great, such a great work to be part of.

And I wanna also stress that I learned so much working on this, it was a personal experience as well as a creative one.  
  
[4:52] Fiona: So what were your steps? Because I can imagine it's quite hard going into a project, someone's already written a beautiful story, and then having to tackle it to create art to accompany it, but also continue that story.

Aśka: Yeah, so I guess you really need to identify with the characters, you need to find some similarities in which you basically inhabit them and drive through, because for me, comic is an experience and I always say that to people. It's not, comics aren't pictures, with speech bubbles slapped on top of them.

They are, in a book like this, it'd be a thousand panels, which are spaced very carefully and fluidly flow, both visually and verbally, the action. There's a pacing, there's a beat, there are page turns.

It's like a roller coaster that someone designs. The person who designs the roller coaster knows exactly when you're going to feel at each point, right? They know when you're going to be screaming. They know when you're going to be happy. They know you're going to be relieved.

This is exactly what a comic maker does.

They pace the thing by allowing you to be experiencing things through the characters and by slowly moving the action through the panels. And so, yeah, I imagined the characters from the dialogue I was thinking about all the little ticks they might have, you know, the way they might pull their hair back behind their ear or be nervous and maybe rub their hands together or look away or blush.

And this really allowed me to, I guess, journey through and deliver that to the readers in visual format. Yeah, that's really fantastic.

Fiona: Do you approach it differently to when you're the sole creator of a book or a project?  
  
[6:18] aśka: I think probably feelings are where I start with, so it's probably similar. I would start with feelings and emotions and I call them sensory drivers. There's like things that interest me, whether it's a texture or a sound, and then I would develop a story from that. But I think the beginning here was the same, like I latched onto the feelings and the stories and the emotions of Jessica's manuscript and then developed it from there. So I guess it's a similar starting point.

Fiona: Besides the front cover, there wasn't any colour in the book, but you used shading to portray those details where colour might step in. Can you tell us a bit more about that?  
  
[6:55] aśka: Well, yeah. So, unfortunately, you know, Australia is a small market and Fremantle Plus is a wonderful publisher but very, very small. But yes, we had to make the book in black and white, but because it was for teens and we wanted to make it as exciting as possible, the shading and the gradients were very important to allow this kind of, I guess, a spectrum of experiences you might have. And it's all part of the emotional language of comics.

Actually, I'd like to point out here that comics actually have five different literacies in them. So there's not just the reading, writing literacy, which you read, and the visual literacy, which you'd expect from images, but there's also things like emotional literacy, like when you read people's gestures, you've got the symbolic, you know, with all the light bulb moments or emotions being shown on the outside. And then you have the spatial, which is the layout.

So all of these things, you need to have colour and gradient and all the visual materials that you can use to deliver the story in all of those directions.  
  
[7:52] Fiona: One thing in particular, I mean, I love the book 'Stars in Their Eyes' the whole thing was really, really beautiful. But one thing in particular that I noticed, which I really liked, was the detail of the art like even the background characters, they weren't just a bog-standard person silhouette. All of them were very, very different and had their own characteristics and were all unique.

Aśka: And I think that's thanks to Jessica's great starting manuscript where I really could see those people. They were definitely real to me and so it was so much easier then to deliver them as real people to the reader because they're so unique and their relationships are so beautifully fleshed out.

Fiona: It's a really beautiful story about friendship, acceptance and the importance of representation. Why are those themes so close to your heart?  
  
[8:40] aśka: Well, you know, I think a lot of us can identify with being back in high school and struggling through things, maybe being different, and the need for acceptance is so basic, so human, and there's that struggle. I grew up in, I actually moved quite a lot, I went to about six different high schools, and I lived in a lot of country, New South Wales area. 

So yeah, it was hard when you are slightly different to fit in and I really identified, I think, with Maisie on that level is that on one hand Maisie is this really feisty character who says you know 'this is who I am' and has these opinions but on the other hand of course she's very insecure about this thing that separates her from everyone else which is her disability it's so visible and I love that struggle within her, you know of balancing those two things, that really kind of made me identify with her the duality of who she was.

So for me being able to take Jessica's message and show it to kids out there who might feel really alienated, suddenly they have a book where they're a main character. It is amazing. What a great honour to be part of that.

[9:44] Fiona: So why is it important for children to have access to books like this one?

Aśka: Well, I think it creates very early on a sense that you are not alone and the sooner you realise that, the easier things become.

Somehow it's a strange tendency we have, right, that we think, 'oh we must be the only one' and then there's this there's shame and stress and anxiety involved with that. If you know that the world is so much bigger than your hometown or your school or your small community and there are people out there who are like you and they'll support you, suddenly there's this hope and energy and zest for future and what will come, and I think these books offer that.

They offer this window and they also promise that the future will be better because look, now we have this first book, maybe there'll be another one, another one where you'll be able to see yourself represented more, and there is really no greater joy for anyone, whether you're three years old or 30 years old, to see yourself represented in the media and in the world at large.

Fiona: And I think that's such an important message and we're slowly creeping there as a society, being able to see yourself in lots of different mediums and that's a fantastic thing about this book.  
  
[10:50] aśka: Yeah, and I think it's wonderful if any of the readers or listeners have a chance to listen to Jessica Walton talk about this subject, is that it's so interesting to think about disability being one of those last kind of marginalised groups that are finally getting their day out in the bigger sphere, but it's taken them so much time and effort to get there, so I think this is such a great moment, like a tipping moment, and I'm hoping that it will continue.

[11:17] Fiona: And you're a passionate advocate for visual literacy. What does it mean to you to see graphic novels, manga, and comics becoming more popular?

[11:25] Aśka: Oh, yes. I have a brain that is so visual, everything that happens in my brain is visual. Every kind of metaphor or idea first appears in my mind as a picture or a cartoon or a little movie. 

And when I was a kid, I used to think it was a curse but I realise now it's a bit bit of like a superpower and I use it to create things and it's so nice to see that there is such a need for it, such hunger for it and there's so many other people out there who love visual learning, love visual experiences.

And I think, as I said, comics are opening up more and more. I think they are offering different kind of experiences. I think they come from a very difficult history of being kind of, you know, assumed to be Pulp Fiction or somehow literature for the delinquents.

Interestingly, it was based on a research of one man who actually had no data to prove his claims, but this has stained the word 'comics' for many, many decades, and it took many decades for comics to kind of rise up from that miasma. And it was mainly marginalized groups that helped comics rise up so it was people who didn't normally have the voice in the mainstream publishing, who would be writing comics about their experiences, whether it was people of a different gender spectrum or people from different ethnic groups. And it was amazing what these independent comics did and slowly they rose up and became what we call graphic novels today.

You know, autobiographical graphic novels are one of the most popular read mediums.  
  
[12:55] And again, it's this aspect of experience, so when you read a graphic novel, you have a first-hand experience of the main character through this movie that happens in your head because of the way that the graphic novel is constructed. And that emotional connection you have, because you're looking at visuals rather than just reading words, that is really what hooks you into the heart of the story. And I think the earlier we can get to read them, understand them, and study graphic novels and comics, the better I think we'll be off as a society, because we are surrounded by images and we need to understand this world we're in, and this is such a fantastic way way to do it.  
  
[13:32] Fiona: Now the challenge has wrapped up for 2023, but we want everyone to keep reading. How important has reading been in your life?

Aśka: Oh, so important, but I am the only child and I have moved a lot, so I have spent a lot of time in my bedroom reading. 

Yes, that's something that's taken me to places, given me my imagination that I have today, and made me understand how there's really no rules when you can can story tell yourself. Also, it's offered me this window into catharsis. So this idea that, wow, you know, these stories, I can make my own stories, I can make my own ending to the day, I can make my own future imaginings of what I want to be and where I want to go and it's given me great hope and excitement. 

So yes, I definitely think that reading is like a cloud of joy for everyone. 

Fiona: Before we let you go, I'm going to ask you a couple of rapid-fire questions. Just want the first answer that pops into your head. What is your favourite book?

Aśka: Right now, I think it would be 'Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up With Me'.

Fiona: What are you reading at the moment?  
  
[14:39] Aśka: Right now I'm re-reading 'Long Weekend in Alice Springs'. 

Fiona: Non-fiction or fiction?

Aśka: It's actually a graphic novel based on an essay.

Fiona: Favourite genre? 

Aśka: I would say character-driven drama. 

Fiona: And in the spirit of the Premier's Reading Challenge, how many books do you hope to read in 2023?  
  
[15:03] Aśka: I would love to be able to read a book a week, but I think more realistic for me personally is a book a month but, yeah, I would love to read 50, you know, over 50 books.

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

Thanks to our guest, Aśka, 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.  
  
[15:44] Music.