

Audio Title: The Book Stoop Charnaie Gordon Here Wee Read - From a Creative Outlet to a Journey in Entrepreneurship

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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot. I got you.

So, you're going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's the stoop.

Amanda, Amanda Lytle, she will be there to welcome you to the conversation. The Book Stoop, that's the name of the spot. We got the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, the best kinds of folks.

Oh, me? I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is our podcast. I am so glad you're here.

Now, I'm going to let you get to Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks, Bex. Hey friend, let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here with us. Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Charnaie Gordon. Charnaie is an author, an entrepreneur, a content creator, podcast host and a lover of books. Charnaie is also the founder of an Instagram and growing online community called "Here Wee Read," connecting with people with diverse and inclusive books, kid-friendly products, and family experiences they will love.

In today's conversation on *The Book Stoop*, Charnaie shares the story behind *Here Wee Read*. She also shares her perspectives and realities as a content creator and a writer and opens up about how isolating yet rewarding the creative process can be. We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question. So, what are you reading these days?

Charnaie Gordon: Well, right now I am reading – and I've been reading this book for a while because I'm really savoring all of the information and I don't want to – I really want to digest everything and I don't want to start another book until I like really finish this one. It's called "We Should All Be Millionaires" by Rachel Rodgers who is amazing. So, the subtitle is "A Woman's Guide to Earning More, Building Wealth and Gaining Economic Power," and I am in love with this book. It's so, so good. It's all about money, right?

Amanda Lytle: Yes.

Charnaie Gordon: And how do you leverage your wealth, especially as a black female. Well, she's writing this from a black female perspective and just talking about how women need to have

this money mindset and be in control of your finances. So, I'm really enjoying this book. Like I said, this is the only thing I've been reading for like the past month and a half. I think maybe next month on October, I will start a new book. But right now, I've just been savoring this one.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, I love that. And what have been some biggest takeaways or anything that you've actually been able to implement so far?

Charnaie Gordon: Well, I'm going to do her – she has this money challenge, and she talks about it in the book. I think it's like a 30-day money challenge. But I want to try her challenge and I am like preparing myself like just mentally and financially to get onboard to do her money challenge. So that is something that I'm really, really looking forward to.

Amanda Lytle: Very cool. I love that idea and I think even just for myself, it has been a really challenging year. So, anything that I can consume that just even shifts perspectives, I'm into it.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah. So, you should check that one out if you haven't already.

Amanda Lytle: Well, speaking of books, I know there's a huge love of books in your life and I know that you've written lots of books and even with *Here Wee Read*, I would love to start with the back story behind *Here Wee Read*.

Charnaie Gordon: Sure. Yeah. I started *Here Wee Read* really out of a space of wanting to have a creative outlet. I had a blog that I started years ago. This is like all pre-kids. I had a blog pre-kids, and I've always loved writing and so I just started blogging and I – people used to always ask me for recommendations about, you know, just different things, not always necessarily books.

So, I had this other blog, but I was like, “Nah, this is not really my jam. I wasn't really vibing with the blog that much.” So, I stopped doing that blog. Then I got pregnant with my first child which was a daughter and she – so right – and then right after I had her, 15 months later we had our son and we – if you can imagine being in a space of having two kids under the age of two. Not really – we didn't really plan to have our kids so close in age. It just kind of happened that way.

But having two kids under two, breastfeeding two kids under the age of two at that time, divert all the things and I just needed this way to release and this outlet. So, I just made the decision. I'm like, you know what, I'm going to start blogging again and – because writing is something that I really enjoy and I'm just going to start talking about the thing that I know best and that is books.

That's really the story behind it. That was February of 2015 that I made that decision. It was probably one of the best decisions that I've ever made because I mean now fast forward to 2021 and I'm still doing it and I can honestly say that, well, for being consistent and sticking with it even in the midst of having two children, having – being a wife. You know, having this family and at the time when I started the blog, a fulltime job.

So, I was kind of like doing all of these things. But I knew in my heart that I wanted to be consistent with the blog. I don't know. It was just something in me. I'm like I just enjoy this and at the time,

I wasn't getting paid a dime. I didn't even know that you could make money from blogging or anything like that and it wasn't until I decided to join Instagram in particular that I started finding out that you could monetize not necessarily Instagram at the time. It was more so monetizing your blog.

I'm like, "Oh, you could do that?" and I started following people who were doing it, getting to know people that were – and then like, yeah, you can totally do that and it took me maybe – I didn't start earning any money until maybe like year four when I was blogging, right? So, for four years, I didn't earn a penny. I was just doing it out of a space of just I love to do this. I'm still doing it out of a space of I love to do this.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: But now I'm just getting paid to do it fulltime.

Amanda Lytle: The consistency and the passion just in my opinion just will always prove successful because you're nourishing yourself in the process and then you're able to just continue showing up the way that you've wanted to into a project that is a passion project. I love it.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: I have a question about the growth on Instagram because I mean upholding and just keeping a page going is a lot of work. So ...

Charnaie Gordon: It's a lot of work.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, and then I mean you're mommy-ing at the same time. So how are you able to fit that in and what were your priorities on the Instagram page alone?

Charnaie Gordon: So, the Instagram page is interesting because when I first started, it was kind of like – I felt like I was just talking to crickets. You know, it's like is anybody even looking at this? Why am I doing this? But I felt – again, I was very passionate about it. Then, you know, as you get to meet new people, start interacting with a couple of people, you start to kind of build this community organically and that's how that kind of started to happen.

Then I would just start to get followed by librarians and educators and of course parents and grandparents, things like that. But then in 2018, 2019, that's when I started to really like – especially 2018. It was just like consistent flow of this influx of just people finding out about me through word of mouth. I did have a few celebrities even. Like I have several celebrities that follow me that have shared my page and so things like that that have helped me kind of along the way.

Then of course building partnerships and relationships with different publishers and different spot – like brands and stuff like that, right? Because I have two kids. So, I'm able to leverage that aspect of it as well.

But then as you know, in summer of 2020 is when George Floyd happened and prior to that happening, I had already had a really vibrant community on Instagram. I was about 200,000 followers at the time and over – as soon as George Floyd happened that first week or so, it was just – it just exploded and I was like, “What’s going on? Where are all these people coming from?” and so I literally probably got over 100,000 followers just within like three or four days seriously, following the unfortunate death of George Floyd and it was just – it was kind of crazy and I didn’t really know how to feel about it and how to process it. I was like, “Well, should I be happy about this or maybe a bit skeptical?”

Like do these people really care that much about diversity or is it to just check a box on their list? So, I think a lot of people of color kind of felt that same way and I’ve talked to other people of color who had similar experiences where you just went up in popularity and it was just kind of like – kind of didn’t really know how to feel about it. Yeah. In other circumstances, you’re like, “Oh, well, this is great. I’ve gone viral.” But then it’s just kind of like the underlying reason why it went viral is like, hmm, yeah.

Amanda Lytle: All right. That has actually been a bit of a theme that we’ve been speaking about with some guests on here is that collective exhaustion of just white people being like, “Hey. So, what do I do now? I feel really bad,” and that’s on us. That’s not your responsibility at all. So, I can imagine that that would be an interesting feeling. It’s like can I be happy about this or – yeah, the skepticism in it. It’s so valid.

Charnaie Gordon: Right, yeah. It’s kind of just – and then, you know, of course for like the whole month of, what, July of 2020, book sales were like through the roof. I mean you’re talking record sales. Like even through my like affiliate book shops that I have set up both on Amazon and book shop, like I had like 10K months. Like back-to-back and these are just like I’m making 10 grand off of this affiliate bookshop and, you know, then of course once it starts to die down, it’s just like, “OK. Yeah.” Back to business as usual.

Rebekah Borucki: Hey, friend. We are coming straight back to *The Book Stoop* after a quick break.

Amanda Lytle: I would love to ask you about your kids’ books that you’ve written because even when I was flipping through this, I was I cannot wait to get my hands on these books, particularly *Race Cars*. So, I know that a kid’s book about diversity, *Race Cars* and *A Friend Like You*, like even right on your website, I would love to hear about how those came to be and even just a writing process because as a creative in this space, it does take a lot of emotional labor, right? So, tell me a bit about that.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah. So, I will have to say that all of the three book deals that I have had – you know, and I’m not saying this to brag but this is just part of my story. I didn’t actively – like I wasn’t actively writing manuscripts and submitting them to publishers and that whole process that a lot of writers or aspiring writers go through. I didn’t have to go through that. I was literally approached by the three publishers saying, “Will you write for us?” and so that’s how it kind of happened.

It was just like a DM on Instagram. Hey, will you do this? And two of them were DMs and then one was an email. I was like, “Sure. Why not?” The one that I did have a little bit of hesitation with though is the *Race Cars* book.

Amanda Lytle: Interesting, OK.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah. I just kind of stopped. Well, wait a minute. They’re asking me this – they wanted to bring me in as the editor, right? First of all, my hesitation was I’ve never edited a book in my life, right? Like a children’s book, right? So, I’m like first of all, there’s that thing that’s like, wait a minute, you can’t edit a book. Like you’ve never done this before, right?

So, there was that hesitation. But the other thing was – and this is just my initial feeling. I kind of felt like *Why are they asking me to do this?* I kind of grappled with that a little bit. But I knew exactly why.

The book was originally written by a white woman, and it was a self-published book that she self-published on her own. Amazing book, amazing book. But then I started looking at some of the reviews and what people who had read the book was kind of saying about it. Then I had a different perspective and I’m like you know what, let me – as a person of color, I can go in and make some changes.

So, then I was OK with it. I’m like, OK, I get it and I want to take on the task. But you also kind of grapple with this thing of how will the black people or how will the people of color feel about what my interpretation of this book will be, right?

So, I was struggling with that too. It was just kind of like *What is everybody going to say?* You know, I don’t know. It was just this – it was this conflicting thing that I had with that book, and I think mainly because it was about white privilege, right? Which is such a touchy – can be such a touchy topic, especially to white people.

So, I didn’t want to feel like I was going to offend anybody or make white people feel bad for being white or the opposite, make children of color feel bad for their skin tone, right?

So, there was all of this like conflict going on in my mind with that book in particular just because of the subject matter and it was just kind of touchy. But then over – you know, after I said, you know what, let me just do it. I’m just going to do it and I made the decision to do it.

So again, they wanted to bring me in as the editor to basically make some changes to the book. Some of the feedback they had gotten from the self-published book. So, they knew the type of angle that they wanted to kind of take with it.

So, my first – my job was basically to take that book and rewrite it in my own way, leaving the original story kind of intact. But what I did is I just added some new characters and changed up the ending of it.

Amanda Lytle: I think it's an incredible project.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah. The book itself is still pretty much the same, like the overall plot. But it's very different from the first self-published book that Jenny wrote.

Amanda Lytle: And then you said that the feedback or the overall take of the book was really – it was really well-received.

Charnaie Gordon: Yes. It was. So now – and it's interesting because it's like – well now, most people can't comment on the old book because it's really not in print anymore, the original self-published version of it. But this new version is like – has been really, really well-received, especially like by like educators that are using it in their classrooms, and I think mainly because the discussion section that's in the back is so rich and full of just questions that children and their teachers or children and their grown-ups can really take a deep dive into all of these different topics that we cover in the book.

So that was *Race Cars* with a kid's book about – again that was a quick DM that was sent to me saying, “Hey, you want to do this?” and I was like, “Yeah, why not?” and the way they do their books is a little interesting. So, you basically write the book in a half-day workshop.

Amanda Lytle: Wow.

Charnaie Gordon: Together, yeah. The first draft of the book, right? So, you come out of this half-day workshop. It's like four, five hours and you're in the workshop with the editor and maybe three other – two or three other people from their team and then you coming in as the actual writer or the subject matter expert, right? In that case it was me talking about diversity.

So, the first thing you have to do is you have to tell your story to everybody that's on the – it's kind of like a Zoom chat. So, you tell your story and talk about why you are a subject matter expert. Why are you the one who wants to tell the story and write this book? So, you know, they're taking notes as you're telling your story and then after that, they tell their stories. They introduce themselves and they tell their stories and then it's like, OK, let's write the book.

So, you as the writer or the subject matter expert, you're doing most of the talking and most of the directing. But as you're kind of typing, you know, somebody – the editor is saying, “Oh, why don't we say this?” or the other person on the team, “Well, why don't we add this or take this, add this, take this away? Why don't we say it like this?” and it's just this back-and-forth dialogue that you're having, and you come out with your first draft of the book, you know, at the end of the workshop, which is really cool. So that's like a collaboration effort and that's how they do all of their books.

Amanda Lytle: I love that. I had a question actually about another thing that had come up yesterday was now the fact – and I had actually said this pre-recording was that now it's as if the books that we wish that we had as kids are now available.

Charnaie Gordon: That's right.

Amanda Lytle: Right. So, this is even what I'm feeling about the books that you've had such a part in are now books that, you know, we kind of wish that we had as kids.

Charnaie Gordon: That's right, yeah. It's so great that I get to kind of in a way relive my childhood through – vicariously through my own kids which is pretty amazing when I kind of think about it. But yeah, I love that there are so many books – you know, there could always be more. But there are just so many amazing books that are available for kids today about self-love and just affirming yourself and body positivity, right? Self-acceptance and some of the tougher topics, right? About race and racism and all of these things that kids would probably find relatable today.

Amanda Lytle: I have a question about the creative process and in that creative process, one, I was going to ask, “How do you make sure that you are nourished in the process and that you're maintaining your overall well-being?” and then the other thing I was going to ask is “What are you currently working on that you're balancing?” So, take that away.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah, yeah. So, the creative process is actually really interesting because sometimes it can feel really isolating too, especially when it's just you and you're not – you don't have somebody else to kind of bounce ideas off. You know, sometimes I bounce ideas off of my husband or my kids.

But, yeah, it can feel kind of isolating at times. You know, being a writer, it's kind of like you're just in this space by yourself. But fortunately, I think for me is I'm connected to so many amazing authors, illustrators who have now kind of become my friends. So, there's a few people that I'm really close with that I can say, “Hey, what do you think about this idea?” and they will give me honest feedback. You know because they are creatives too.

So, I think it's nice to kind of have that or just to have this trusted circle of people that can help you and you can bounce ideas off of when you're creating. So, I think that's really important at least for me to have that.

But, you know, for me when I – like taking care of myself is just like I really try to take care of my mental space. Being a fulltime content creator/author, part of my job is to be on social media, and it can get quite taxing, and I don't always love it. But this is the job that I've decided to do at this time.

So, it's a part of the job and I just kind of suck it up whenever I don't feel like doing it and I just put on my consistency hat and I'm like, all right, this is it. You know, I've only got to do it for a few minutes and then, you know, go back in my hole.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: Go back in my creative hole. But yeah, I mean it's all part of it. But I think just really just taking care of my mental space and trying not to stay on social media too long. It can get very – you can get very addicted to it and it's just like this tunnel that just kind of sucks you in.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: Sometimes I will be on Instagram, and I will see a post and I will like it. Then I go down this rabbit hole and the next thing it's like 20 minutes passes and I'm like, "What? I got to get back to work."

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, I know. It's so true.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: What keeps you showing up on those days that seem really difficult or you're just not like into it? What keeps you showing up?

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah. For me, I mean number one, this is now my fulltime job. I previously was a computer programmer. I'm still very much a computer geek but in my previous life, I did information technology. I was a computer programmer for over 15 years and that was my jam. That was my nine-to-five grind and I loved it and I loved it. I really enjoyed my time. But I kind of felt like this is my time.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: This is – you know, I've given it 15 plus years of my life, and I felt like I wasn't really growing or being challenged in a lot of ways.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: And there was nowhere else for me to go up the ladder. It was like either you make a lateral move, and you go this way, or you become a manager or a director. I'm like, "Don't want to be the manager. Don't want to be a director."

Amanda Lytle: Right.

Charnaie Gordon: So, what do I do?

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. The move in to doing the stuff for yourself I feel like would feel quite liberating. But at the same time now it's like yeah, you're in charge of all of the things.

Charnaie Gordon: That's right, right. So that is also part of what keeps me going. It's like this is how we make money for our family. So that's also – this is my job. That's my motivation. But also, you know, in addition to that, I really do enjoy what I do now. So that – it really a lot of times doesn't really feel like I'm working. I know it sounds cliché and a lot of people say that. But it really doesn't. It's just like I feel like I get to talk about books all day, right?

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: And I get paid for it and I get to do fun things with my kids if I'm doing like a brand sponsorship. So, I feel like I kind of have the best of both worlds right now and I get to write children's books.

Amanda Lytle: Exactly. I was just going to say a huge congrats on that because all of this success, it does sound really fulfilling.

Charnaie Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Thank you.

Amanda Lytle: Of course. I have a question about a shoutout. So, if you had a shoutout for an account, a person, an organization, a disruptor, activist or change agent, who would it be?

Charnaie Gordon: Oh, gosh. There's so many. There are so many people that I love. Does it have to be book-related?

Amanda Lytle: No. No, it could be whatever you want.

Charnaie Gordon: Oh, OK. My absolute favorite person on – well, I have two. Of course Oprah Winfrey, right?

Amanda Lytle: Oh, yeah.

Charnaie Gordon: Who doesn't love Oprah? She's like my number one for life. But there's also Myleik Teele who I absolutely love and it's – M-Y-L-E-I-K is her first name, and she goes by Myleik on Instagram. But she is like – she's an entrepreneur, alright?

She's the founder of this company called curlBOX, but she is just this powerhouse and she's so motivational. She's so inspiring. She's also a mom of two kids. But she's just so relatable to me and she also has a podcast and that's how I first found her through her podcast. But she is on Instagram all the time, like every day, and if you watch her Instagram lives – mostly I watch her stories, her Instagram stories, and I just learn so much from her and she's just so – she's so willing to help especially women of color. Like that's her jam. She loves inspiring and empowering women of color to be their best selves. That's what I'm all about. It's just like I love her so much. Yeah. So, if I had to give a shoutout, it would be to Myleik.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. I will have that linked. Thank you so much for being a part of this.

Charnaie Gordon: You're so welcome. Yay! I'm so thrilled that you asked me to be a part of it or Bex. So, shout out to Bex.

Amanda Lytle: Big shoutout to Bex! We love Bex!

Charnaie Gordon: Yes. Thank you Bex for asking me to be on your amazing podcast. This was such an honor. So, I am thrilled for everything that Bex has going on with Row House Publishing and everything. So, I'm a huge fan of Bex and all that she's doing. So, I appreciate that opportunity.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. We hope you loved the conversation, and we will be back again soon. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you're able to do so. Writing a written review helps reach more listeners too. Check out all of the show notes for the links and share *The Book Stoop* with your friends. Talk soon.

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