

Audio Title: Daniel O'Brien
Duration Transcribed: 0:31:48
Number of Speakers: 3

Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, neighbor! Welcome to our third season of *The Book Stoop*.

And if you are new here, let me help you get to where you're going.

So, you're gonna go past the corner of 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 where you will find our stoop.

Our host, Amanda Lytle, will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop* is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers – our favorite people.

And I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing. Now, come on in and meet 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.

Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Daniel Jay O'Brien. Daniel is a Trinidad-born author and illustrator currently residing in New York with his fantastic partner, Ashleigh, and their loyal but nervous dog, Obbie. He holds a BFA in Illustration from the School of Visual Arts. With that and his love of everything folklore, nature, and science, he is continually fuelling his passion for illustration. He uses his honed ability to bring forth exuberant and whimsical illustrations full of life and vibrant color.

Daniel has written, illustrated, designed, and self-published two children's books, *The Carnival Prince* and *I am the Midnight Robber* are both projects that are near and dear as they represent his Caribbean heritage.

He has also teamed up with the small publisher, Caribbean Reads and illustrated the picture books, the *Talking Mango Tree*, and *The Masquerade Dance*.

In the conversation today, we hear all about Daniel's love of sci-fi and how he started exploring storytelling early in his life with illustrations and then into comic strips and books. As his work evolved, he began weaving his culture and his own personal narratives into his stories. Much of his work and mentorship with you aims to encourage others to celebrate their own stories while absorbing the lessons in the sharing.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you are loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram @rowhousepub. Every share, 5-star rating, and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we are super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question, so what are you reading these days?

Daniel J. O'Brien: All right. So I am a huge fan of sci-fi, far-flung future sci-fi, and then weirdly enough, post-apocalyptic or on the brink of apocalypse. So my favorite series as of now is people know it as *The Expanse*, it's a sci-fi television show but I tore through the books twice over in the span of a few months. It's a – I call it Harry Potter for adults like the best way to put it like it has all those specific tropes of characters, but they do such a good job of telling stories and weaving these huge narratives back together, so I love that.

And then I just finished Chuck Wendig's *Wanderers*, which is essentially this beautiful mix of apocalyptic – like it's present tense, a virus has the world where people all just like – just a few people have gotten up and started walking in a huge group and they're not conscious, they can't – they're almost impervious, and just wandering. And people and their families are following behind them trying to protect them and figure out what's going on.

So I would not spoil anything from there, but it is such a gripping story and at the same time Chuck Wendig does a very good job of weaving modern-day politics, ethics, religion, and how everything intersects in the modern age like with Fox News and MSNBC like that type of stuff. Like I was very surprised how well he was able to weave a narrative and tell such a compelling story and these really deep, flawed, beautiful characters. It's a little bit of sci-fi actually as well. Amazing.

Amanda Lytle: Right. Yeah. You've got my ears perked here. I'm even thinking about the undertones of this narrative here. Oof! Thank you for sharing.

Daniel J. O'Brien: You're very welcome.

Amanda Lytle: So on the topic even there of narratives, authorship, writing, reading, you, my friend, are an author yourself. I would love to know about your journey into writing and storytelling.

Daniel J. O'Brien: OK. Well, I for a very long time have considered myself an illustrator. As early as I can remember, I was always drawing pictures and telling stories that way. I'm pretty sure with any kid in my age group, they were huge fans of like Ninja Turtles, right And the moment I could, I got those Marvel notebooks and I remember seeing the Ninja Turtles movie for the first time and going home and drawing that out in comic strips. That was my first attempt at storytelling.

But from that point on, it was more comic books and just single illustrations and I always dabbled until high school. Then finally when I went to the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, New York, I really started to dive in like what sort of storytelling do I like the best? And it was illustration. It was the single image. And then it got to a point where I started weaving in my culture. I'm originally from Trinidad and Tobago. That's where I was born. And I moved up here when I was relatively young.

So there is part of my culture I left behind subconsciously. And when I got to SVA, I started pulling from all these different places because you are forced to live in this world of being an artist and trying to stand out among everybody else, and like what is my story to tell in this moment? And I realized that I'm Trinidadian. I come from a culture of prolific storytellers, designers, and just artists in general. This is what I can pull from. And nobody is really used to seeing this type of stuff. Like people understanding Mardi Gras and stuff like that. Trinidad has something carnival design, beautiful colors, music. Absolutely amazing. So I started pulling from there. And I really start to reconnect with where I came from.

And the moment I started really dive back into actual writing and storytelling was I had hit a rut as a freelance illustrator. I remember sitting in my office on day and trying to make a plan. I had a huge blackboard wall in front of me and I purposely grabbed the drink one night, turned the light on, and sat in front of that blackboard and made a list. Where do I see myself in the next few years? What story do I have to tell? And can I make this life more feasible? Because like any artists, well, a lot of artists, to supplement your art, you're working day jobs. And I wanted to move away from and become a little more involved in my freelance work.

So finally, I was like, you know what? Trinidad, storytelling, I have a love of folklore, and this is stuff I haven't seen really delved into before. So that started my journey sort of writing – illustrating my first book, *The Carnival Prince*, which Row House picked up going on two years ago and published early this year.

Since then, I have written and illustrated another book called *I Am The Midnight Robber* which is based on a *real [0:07:58] [Phonetic]* like a very famous Trinidadian traditional mask character, carnival character, and a girl, a little girl's experience trying to become this larger-than-life character who is usually portrayed by older men. And from that, it's like I just spring boarded. I've been fortunate since Row House picked me up because I think it helped validates what I was doing because when I spoke to Rebekah, she was very, very enthusiastic like, "I've never seen this story told before." And even with that, I would take the book around to different people and they themselves would say, "We've never this story before."

And I started meeting people where, "Thank you for telling this story." They would bring their kids to the readings. People of Caribbean descent were like, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." These little kids would be legitimate fans and it just started snowballing and rolling and rolling until finally like, all right, let's do this.

So right now, I am working on expanding on those types of stories like really diving more into the Caribbean culture aspect of things. And I'm working on a graphic novel series, an anthology

series called *Duppies, Droids, and Dingolay*, so *Duppies* is a Caribbean way of saying ghosts and spirits, *Droids*, androids, sci-fiction, and *Dingolay* is a very specific Caribbean term means like just party. It's festival. Enjoy yourself. Right?

So I'm trying to merge all the genres I love into telling yes, it's an anthology but there is a common theme through everything. And there's a large – a much larger story being told throughout these different narratives. So I finished the first story and I'm going to be testing the waters in Instagram in the next coming weeks and then releasing as I go along.

And then on top of that, I was also fortunate within the last half year, back in January, I was picked by an agent and in the first two weeks, she did a bang of job of in terms of getting me these really beautiful projects. The one I can speak about right now is I am illustrating a story called *Juneteenth*. So *June Tenth* tells a story about a little girl and her first real interaction with the experience of what *Juneteenth* is to her. Right?

So you know like when you are young, I'm sure you're experiencing holidays and different things like that and there comes a point where it really finally hits home the significance of what this actually is. And this story tells that about her. And I love the fact that I'm working that right now. *Natasha Triplett [0:10:42] [Phonetic]*, she is the amazing author that put this together. And partnering with her, dude, I'm so proud of this story right now. I'm in the second round of workup sketches and I can't wait to share it with the world because it's absolute beautiful.

The second one, I can't talk about just yet. The contract just got signed so probably in the next month or so it will be released in *Publishers Weekly* so I can really start talking about it because the publishers literally told me, "Hey, let's lie low for a little while until we get all the contract signed and everything moving forward." But once I get to reveal it, it's absolutely amazing.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. And now, I'm stoked to follow along and actually see what comes out.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: This is great.

Daniel J. O'Brien: I couldn't believe right out of the gate that I got these two projects. No joke. I couldn't believe that. So thank you to Christy Ewers, my amazing agent from The CAT Agency. She helped me out so much.

And then on top of that, this year has been continued blessings in terms of my professional career as an illustrator because I brought in a few other clients. I'm working a couple of other things. I've worked with Educational Press, and I finished the illustrations for a book called *I Hate Science*. That will be released – it's tongue in cheek, little comedy, science fiction. That's going to be released later this year. And they just brought me on for a few cover projects moving forward for the rest of the year. This is amazing. So it's great, absolutely great.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. So I've got a couple of questions here that I'm going to kind of weave in and out of. But I'm curious about how as an illustrator, where does your inspiration come from and do you keep your illustrations rather consistent, or did they change to follow a flow of what you were illustrating for?

Daniel J. O'Brien: I consider myself to be an illustrator of all seasons. In terms of – I will ask anybody that's hiring me, "What style are you looking for in this particular medium? How do you see this going?" Because if you go to my portfolio, you're going to see these variations in styles, right? So if I'm doing like a gritty sci-fi book, there's going to be a different feel like it's – you could tell it's still me in the strokes that I make but there's clearly like a different style and an approach that I'm taking to it.

Amanda Lytle: Right.

Daniel J. O'Brien: In terms of inspiration, I get it wherever I can. Like if I'm out walking my dog and I see something, that can always evolve into something. Of course, what I always refer back to is my love of sci-fi and fantasy and folklore like bringing it back to Duppies, Droids, and Dingolay, it's pulling inspiration from all these different places and making each story your own and telling your own special version of let's face it, because there are only like really 10 stories being told but it's now taking and borrowing and building. And what I like to consider, taking the toys off the shelf and playing with them and telling your own version of that particular story and then putting it back when it's all said and done.

Right now, comic books, which was my original gateway into really reading, I'm back into that now and I find myself in my sketch on my days off drawing comic book characters like really influential comic book characters. My favorite story right now is *Black Hammer* by Jeff Lemire.

Amanda Lytle: OK.

Daniel J. O'Brien: And I would not call it satire but it's a twist on a specific superhero trope and telling a much larger, really relevant and beautiful story. And I recommend anybody that just is a fan of storytelling in general to definitely look up *Black Hammer* because you would love it because like the people that wrote *The Expanse*, like Chuck Wendig, he is very good at creating these huge, beautiful worlds and when you think you're done with it, you realized, "Oh no! There's another alley we need to go down." And just keep pulling you back in. And that's something I want to be able to do someday so I'm drawing inspiration from things like that.

Amanda Lytle: Because I was also interested in how often you go back to Trinidad because I can imagine that that would completely reinvigorate you.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Oh, absolutely. Because of COVID, I haven't been back there in about, whoa, three years. But before that, I was there just about every year visiting family, there's wedding, just vacation, just heading back there every time. I'd be honest, when I first started really putting together *The Carnival Prince*, it came from a trip to Trinidad where once again, I

was in that position where I was trying to figure out where I was going with my career and what story I wanted to tell.

And I remember leaving and heading to the airport trying to find books of like folktales, fairytales, and like very specific Caribbean stories being told. And I realize at that point, it was all the same stories being told over and over again, literally word for word just being poorly recycled with for lack of a better term subpar arts to go along with it.

So when I was leaving that bookstore I was like, “I can do this and do this better.” So just drawing inspiration and building on those stories that I grew up as a child.

Amanda Lytle: OK. So this is kind of weaving me back to the common theme, undertones, and the story that you want to tell. Just wondering about how you would be able to put a common theme or undertones or the story that you want to tell? Like what kind of ties it all together?

Daniel J. O’Brien: I want to tell my story. That makes me think of one of my trips to Trinidad one year where I was taking care of some work, personal work on my tablet’s drawing and this little kid sitting next to me who is also Trinidadian and he was looking and he said, “This is really cool.” So he sparked the conversation. And he is like, “Oh, I’m an artist too.” I was like, “OK. Cool. I want to see what you’re doing.” So he whips out his sketchbook and he shows me all this stuff and it’s anime. It’s traced. It’s copied. It’s anime.

And then at one point, he is like, “So, what’s your advice?” And any time I do school visits, any time I met somebody in person ask me that particular question. It’s always, “Tell your own story.” Especially in the Caribbean where people aren’t used to your particular lifestyle. You may think it’s inane. You may think it might be boring. But these little specks and pieces in it that are only unique to you that other people will find interesting.

And like when I say tell, I want to tell my story, it’s not me being self-centered, it’s me writing what I know and trying to make that in sync for other people and try to connect people to things they are not used to. Like case in point, navigating schools, moving from Trinidad to the States and then understanding that the people that you’re interacting with have little to no understanding of exactly where I come from.

So when it comes time to like bring your own culture’s food to school day and I bring in like curry goats or something like that and having people look and say, “Oh, what is that?” like it’s foreign but it’s something that I love and it’s a staple for me. And then like squinting their eyes and picking with their hands like, “Oh, what am I about to taste?” And they’re realizing, “Oh, this is amazing.” And always having to navigate those little weird things like this is common to me and this is amazing to me, why don’t you know about this?

And then realizing that everybody lives in their own little bubble so, me telling my story and trying to find that in an interesting way is trying to get people out of that bubble and have them realize there is a larger world out there that you’re missing out on. There are other things we need to discover to get out of your comfort zone.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, it's in the simplicity of a conversation that you can learn so much more even about yourself upon reflection, you know.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: I'm interested now to knowing you've done some school visits. So, how did that start and was there always an interest in educating or working with youth?

Daniel J. O'Brien: Absolutely. The other reason that I wrote *The Carnival Prince* is because I moved to the States at an early age and like I said before, there was a disconnect for me. And I wrote *The Carnival Prince* for me to reeducate myself on my culture. Like *The Carnival Prince* for of course, people that don't know, tells a story of a child of very ancient, well-known Caribbean folklore characters. And it's his journey learning about his surroundings, getting over trauma, and becoming bigger than himself to save other people.

And along the way, you're learning bits and pieces about Trinidad down to its national bird, down to national monuments, learning more about carnival. To the point, there's an actual glossary at the back of the book because I made it a point when I'm writing in the voice of very certain characters in the book, it's based in that Trinidad lingo, the Trinidadian lingo. So if you get confused or you don't know a particular word or a particular slang, just go to the back of the back. Once again, it's taking you out of your comfort zone.

Amanda Lytle: That's a brilliant resource to have and a piece of work.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Absolutely. So bringing it back to the schools, when I visit schools, it's always something I wanted to do because once again, I usually go to schools that I know have a Caribbean population so I could present them with here is something that your culture can relate to or your family can relate to but at the same time, here's something you could pass off to your friends and have them learn a little more about where you come from.

Education is always an emphasis especially when I'm writing. I try to put as much of the environment out there as possible. Like I'm not trying to hammer you over the head with it like this is what you need to learn. I'm more trying to immerse you in the story.

Like *I Am The Midnight Robber*, it's told in a very particular dialect. It's written in rhyme, but it's better known as Robber Speak. It's what the character is known to talk like in carnival like this big, larger than life character that speaks in rhyme like very braggadocios. And even though my character is essentially talking about moving mountains, she is still this normal little girl that's trying to instill confidence in herself.

And once again, it's a very specific lingo that's being said. So if you get caught up, go to the back of the book and there's a glossary for you. So it's OK to be uncomfortable as long as you're stepping away, getting out of your circle – your bubble a little bit.

Amanda Lytle: OK. So that kind of makes me interested in two things here. When you are talking about kids and showing them the confidence, you're having these really engaging conversations, allowing them to really truly embrace their stories, teach others through experience, lived experience. No one knows your story better than you.

But I'm wondering about your own confidence and your own self-work that you're working through. Is there any time that a block comes up and how do you work through that?

Daniel J. O'Brien: All right. So that's an amazing question. In terms of the blocks, I've learned to step away. And I know I'm not only talking for myself, and this is something I had to learn as I got older is that when you hit that block, it doesn't make any sense to continue just running at that wall and knocking your head into it because you're just going to get discombobulated, right?

And I've learned whenever I hit those blocks, I don't understand something, or I'm writing or that drawing doesn't make any sense, I want to take my dog out for a walk.

Amanda Lytle: That's great advice. I think anyone needs to digest that one just to step away from it. That even just moving yourself away from it, the reset is the recalibration.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Oh, absolutely. There is like a very, very simple trick that a lot of professional illustrators do when they're working on a piece. You can tell the piece is not working but you can't tell exactly what it is. So what they do, they flip the image horizontally, like if you're working digitally, flip the image horizontally because your brain sees it in a whole different way. It doesn't recognize it what it really was. Right?

So similarly, when you get up and walk away, you give your brain a chance to reconfigure and come back and see that image in a different way. It's like when you're writing a book and you finished that first draft, the first thing they tell you to do is put that draft in the drawer somewhere and leave it alone for a few months and then come back to it afterwards. Because a lot of the times, like, "I can't believe I wrote this." Like, "Oh, my God!" And then you start and x-ing and crossing things out and starting over again because in the moment, "Oh, this is amazing," and you're caught up in that moment. But with anything, with meditation, just give yourself that time to breathe and come back in with a different perspective and you can make it so much better than it was before.

Amanda Lytle: OK. So my next part of this question that I was weaving in has to do with lessons. You're often going to be revisiting your own childhood stories, your upbringing, any goods, bads, highs, lows, uglies, all of the things. So I'm wondering about what some of your biggest lessons through your illustrating and authorship journey have been.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Exactly what I said before. Learning to get up and walk away.

Amanda Lytle: OK.

Daniel J. O'Brien: And learning when that fight is not worth fighting in that moment. Me growing up in this – like I moved around a lot as a younger kid like back in the '80s and '90s, moved from Trinidad, moving from school to school, trying to find a place for myself. And in that time, I had a temper, and I was very [0:24:41] *[Audio cut off]* like I felt like I had to because of my – the way I spoke. I lost my accent very early when I came up here because it was essentially bullied out of me because people didn't understand it.

And so, as a form of trying to conform, I lost it. Not meaning to, but it just happened. And from there, I was always a bigger kid so I'm the bigger kid, so people want to fight you because you're the biggest target. And I became very defensive like that. But at the same time, I'm an artist. I was always the type of person who is always very sensitive and always very quick to go off.

And later in life, I realized that that came from a form of undiagnosed anxiety. And in my early 30s like I hit 30 like a brick wall and I had had my first real bout – like I used to consider this a regular social anxiety disorder and I hit a really bad wall and was like, "Oh, no!" This is something that I really need to deal with because I'm angry all the time, I'm anxious all the time, and I can't pinpoint why. And I found a therapist and I worked with that therapist and really started to breaking things down. It came – always came back to why are you pushing this? Why are you obsessing over this? And it's a disorder like OCD, stuff like that. It's a disorder but at the same time, it's treatable by just understanding yeah, just let it happen.

You get into a fight. You're not always going to walk away calmly but every time you can, it's just another instant to grow. And that's a lesson that I constantly always have to be relearning and relearning. Walk away. Take a deep breath. Because when you come back to that original issue that was causing you stress or causing you turmoil, you have a different on it and you can discuss it better. Like that works for me in my job, that works for me in my relationship, my partner. I'm a better partner because of me going to therapy and learning those lessons and moving forward.

Amanda Lytle: Heck, yes. Speaking of turmoil, I don't know if you can hear the hail outside right now. Oh wait ...

Daniel J. O'Brien: That's what that is.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. Can you hear that?

Daniel J. O'Brien: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: So it's like mega turmoil outside. I just wanted to acknowledge that the topic of therapy, I think that this in a sense is becoming something that is spoken about more openly and more I think honestly too. So just acknowledging that you're able to even articulate that this has not only changed my life. It has made me like you said, a better partner, a better friend, a better person, like a better businessperson, like a better illustrator, a better everything because you're just holistically looking after yourself.

And again, I just said this to one of my guests earlier today, you're also modeling that to the world around you and to take that version of yourself even as an educator myself, I can really see you in this, is taking that version of yourself into these schools and into these little communities with students that need that role model, I don't even know where I was going with that, just besides honoring and just acknowledging that because that's monumental. And the walking away from it is something that I even know for myself that I can even take away from this conversation as that reminder that it's like, yeah, Amanda, it's going to be turn it horizontal, you know.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Flip it horizontal, turn it upside down, and walk away from it for a little while. Sorry. Turn it horizontal. Flip it upside down. If you don't see what's wrong in that moment, turn it over. Put it face down and just walk away for a second. Take that breather and walk away and then come back to it when – like in you're in an argument, there are certain times where I have to tell that person, "I can't talk about this right now. I'm just being honest. Give me some time to decompress. And we will come back and talk about this, and we will have a much more fulfilling conversation and really get through this."

Amanda Lytle: That's the growth and that's the healing. Ugh! Daniel, I'm loving this conversation. I've got one more question just to wrap it up and honor your time here too. And that is, if you could give a shout-out to an account, a person, an organization, disruptor, activist, or change agent, who would that be?

Daniel J. O'Brien: Oh, man. All right. So shout-out first to my partner, *Ashleigh Ray Visions* [0:29:02] [Phonetic] on Instagram. She is an amazing partner, amazing photographer, just a great person in general. I couldn't see myself without her.

In terms of organizations, I say, I want to be fair to myself because in this moment especially with the news that has been happening in the States in the last few months, heck, in the last week or so, I've been scrambling to find ways to contribute and give back. And right now, there's a podcast I listen to called Pod Save America. They are political pundit bros is the best way to put it, but they have organization that pretty much helps you get out there to vote because yes, things are, from my perspective, a lot of perspectives, seem like they're very much going back in time right now especially in the States.

And I know a lot of people feel very, very beat down from it all and let's face, AOC said it best like in terms of like fanning out that news and getting in an email saying, "Oh, my God! I can't believe Supreme Court did this. Give me \$15." We don't need that. That's going to turn more people off of voting.

But Pod Save America, they are a specific organization. Well, I can't remember off the top of my head right now, they help get up initiatives – I forgot the exact search engine, but it tells you where you can volunteer in your own neighborhood, to grassroots. Because let's face it, that's what we need more of these days.

It's more grassroots intervention and building up your immediate surroundings and building up from there and building up the people that you want to represent you from that level up because to me personally, a lot of problems especially in the government are people in these higher up areas that just stay there for way too long. And they are getting paid by corporations that are now – well, not now, but for close to decade are considered people which are preposterous to me.

So we need to find more AOCs, more people that are working from the ground level up and actually working for a better working class.

Amanda Lytle: I feel that. I will have those notes link too. Daniel, thank you so much for being a guest on *The Book Stoop*. I look forward to these new projects and what's coming in the next couple of months for you.

Daniel J. O'Brien: Thank you so much. And thank you so much for having me. This is awesome. I enjoy these types of conversations always, always.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, me too. Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to check out rowhousepublishing.com/podcast for full episode transcriptions and guest image descriptions and the show notes for all the links. Talk soon.

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