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To cite this article: Vera J. Camden & Valentino L. Zullo (08 Nov 2023): “There’s always that hope”: an interview with Terri Libenson, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2023.2276691](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2023.2276691)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2023.2276691>



Published online: 08 Nov 2023.



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“There’s always that hope”: an interview with Terri Libenson

Vera J. Camden^a and Valentino L. Zullo^b

^aDepartment of English, Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA; ^bDepartment of English, Ursuline College, Pepper Pike, OH, USA

ABSTRACT

In Summer 2023, we sat down with Terri Libenson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Pajama Diaries* and the *Emmie and Friends* series. She shared with us a bit about her early interest in comics, her journey into comics-making, and the difference in her readers as a comic strip creator, and a middle-grade cartoonist. Together we think about what it is about the form that lends itself so well to processing traumatic experiences in a way that can be both creative and therapeutic. We also discussed her process, what she’s currently reading, and we hear a little about her upcoming work and what she still wants to do in her series.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 July 2023

Accepted 24 October 2023

KEYWORDS

Girls; middle-grade; therapy; psychology; thought bubble

In Summer 2023, we sat down with Terri Libenson, *New York Times* bestselling creator of *The Pajama Diaries* and the *Emmie and Friends* series. She shared with us a bit about her journey into comics, her readers as a comic strip creator, and a middle-grade cartoonist, and what is it about the comics form that can be both appealing and safe for its readers. We also talked about her process, her relationships with other cartoonists, and what she’s currently reading. Finally, we hear a little about her upcoming work and what she still wants to do in her series.

Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo: Thanks for meeting with us. This is very exciting.

Terri Libenson: No problem. Thanks for working with me. I just got back from a trip to Israel.

Camden and Zullo: Tell us about that.

Libenson: I applied to this programme through PJ library.¹ That’s an organisation that selects Jewish-themed books from authors and distributes them to Jewish families all over North America for free. For instance, I have a book about a bat mitzvah girl in my *Emmie and Friends* series called *Becoming Brianna* (Figure 1). Their middle grade site, PJ Our Way, picked it up.



Figure 1. Cover to *becoming Brianna*. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: Sounds like a great programme.

Libenson: Now they have a publishing arm, so they're trying to really strengthen their identity. In May, they sent about 20 published authors to Israel as an incentive to write more Jewish and Israel-themed books that PJ could publish and/or distribute. I was part of that as well as a virtual residency with them during the pandemic.

Camden and Zullo: It's all fiction?

Libenson: It's anything. A great variety.

Camden and Zullo: Well, congratulations. Where did you go?

Libenson: All over! We started in the Negev. It was very spiritual, alluding to Genesis: in the beginning. . .in the desert. We landed in Jerusalem after that and ended in Tel Aviv. I'd been to Israel before, but I went with a different lens this time, more from a storytelling point of view. They wanted us to be inspired and to connect with one other and that definitely happened.

Camden and Zullo: That tour sounds amazing and it gets comics (and other books!) into the hands of kids. So, what was it for you? What got you excited about comics and why do you want to tell stories this way?

Libenson: Oh, my gosh, so many thoughts. Well, I was always drawn towards art and for some reason, specifically towards comics. I don't know where that came from, because I don't remember anyone in my family really having an aptitude for creating comics, even though they're all very artistic.

Camden and Zullo: Did you read certain things?

Libenson: So, I think it all began with theft! My brother had a collection of comic magazines and books.

Camden and Zullo: Older brother?

Libenson: My much older brother. He was already a teenager. I think some of this began because he had *Mad* magazines and *Archie* comics as well as comic strip collections. I would sneak into his room and steal them and forget to bring them back. Luckily, he was so busy by the time he was a teenager, I think he hardly noticed that I was taking them.

Camden and Zullo: The older brother seems really critical to this. That's a common story, it seems. It has to be sneaky, too!

Libenson: Yeah, what is it about that?

Camden: I have vivid memories of fully opening a drawer and there would be a stack of Indians paraphernalia, the baseball team, comic books, *Mad* magazine and more. So, you sit there, and you pore over these things.

Libenson: Yeah, yeah. And I had a few of my own too. I remember a *Peanuts Treasury* that I still have.

Camden and Zullo: You must be glad you kept it.

Libenson: Oh, it's falling apart. It's torn apart at the seams, or as I say, 'well loved.' I think the combination of art and writing, or visual humour grabbed me. It's funny, because I never really considered myself a humorous kid. In fact, I was kind of a serious kid, but I was always drawn towards humour (later on, I found it in myself, thankfully). I absorbed those stories, and I started creating my own comics. I had my own cast of characters just like *Peanuts*. I loved having an ensemble cast with different personalities. And there was another girl down the street who was also artistic, we would get together after school, we would draw comics together. I was very quiet and shy and she was kind of awkward, so we would have these characters go on adventures and live out our fantasies. I think at one point we even had them go on the Love Boat. It was a way for us to really just get our desires across. I guess we wanted to be popular, well-liked people when we were kids and that was one way to do it: through these stories. So, I just kept going.

Camden and Zullo: Where did the inspiration come from? It's almost like an alter ego you created. Was that just like a thing that came to you? For example, J.K. Rowling said Harry Potter 'fell' into her head one day.²

Libenson: It started with those comics that I used to make up as a kid. I think my childhood characters were an idealised version of myself and my life, an outlet to express what I really wanted. Later it all morphed into something else. I don't necessarily try to create these fantasy types of characters where I can live my life through others, but my work did become more autobiographical as I got older. Even with the kids' books, they still are to an extent.

Camden and Zullo: You created a nice fantasy, a popular girl who's not mean in *Invisible Emmie*.

Libenson: You're talking about Katie.

Camden and Zullo: Yeah, she's an interesting character because Emmie imagines her in order to help herself. When you think about the super ego, the conscience, people always think about the it as very punishing, but a psychoanalyst illuminated it for me once when she said that the super ego is also very supportive. The super ego is also the part that says, well done!

Libenson: That's a very nice super ego.

Camden and Zullo: The part of me that says you can do it, the inner helper, that's the super ego. That's Katie. The idea is that, that's also the voice of the supportive part of your conscience. The super ego is observing, it can observe to condemn or to support.

Libenson: I find it very fascinating. What a deep dive.

Camden and Zullo: Well, it's a really interesting character you've created where she is imagined by Emmie and she helps her find herself. Regarding these two different characters, can you talk about the two different formats you use to distinguish their stories? In *Invisible Emmie*, the main story is told in a sort of illustrated novel way with the imaginary part in more traditional comics (Figures 2 and 3). Your recent work

EMMIE

My name is Emmie Douglass. I'm thirteen and in seventh grade.



I was born here in Lakefront. My parents say I came into the world with a "howl that rattled the windows." They say it like it's the funniest thing in the world.

"Irony," my dad calls it.

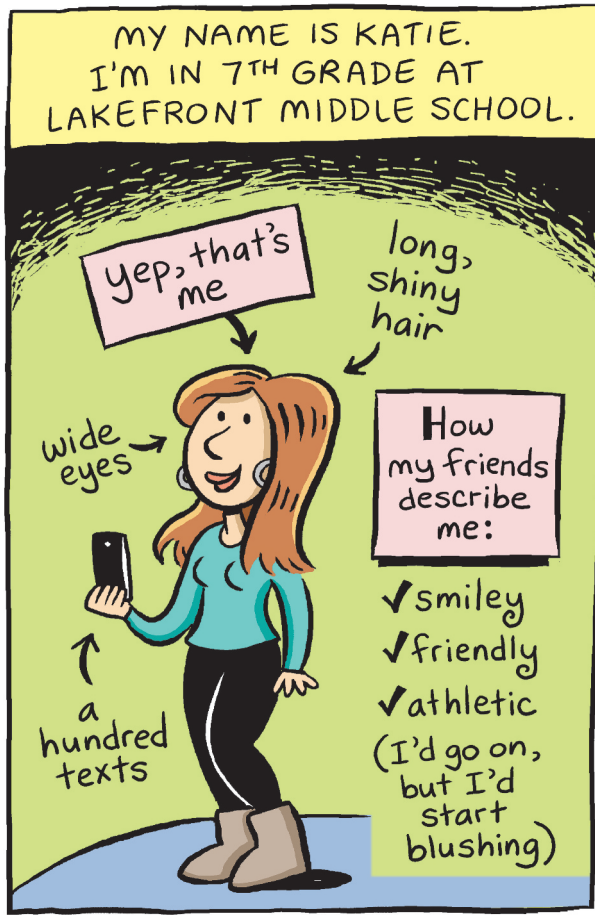
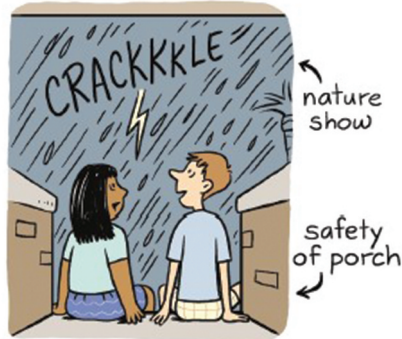


Figure 3. From *Invisible Emmie*, 14. Reprinted with permission.

Surprisingly Sarah uses the same format but to illustrate two different alternate timelines (Figures 4 and 5). How do you decide to switch between? Does it have a different role for you in the different comics.

Libenson: *Invisible Emmie* started out more as an experiment, using two tracks with a main character and secondary main character. It was my first book and originally it was going to completely be an illustrated novel in the vein of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, or *Big Nate*, where you have a lot of text which is punctuated by little doodles, where a lot of the humour lies. My literary agent was the one to suggest the change in format. He said, 'why don't you make one of the girls' chapters a graphic novel?' At first, I cursed him because he gave me so much more work. Now I praise him. It was a genius idea because it really differentiates between the two characters. I've grown to really love illustrating the graphic novel chapters. As far as writing goes, I enjoy the textier chapters. That's because, as a former comic strip creator, I always had to keep everything very tight in three panels. With the books, it's very liberating to me to just go off on tangents. Anyway, that's the

Our houses aren't big, and they're pretty old, but they do have large covered front porches. We like to hang out on mine because it's so cute and homey. My mom decorated it with plants and flowerpots, little wood chairs, a small table, and a multicolor outdoor rug. Leo and I like to play Bananagrams on the rug or sit on the steps, talk, and people watch. But the best thing?



My mom isn't thrilled that the porch has turned into:



Figure 4. From *Surprisingly Sarah*, 3. Reprinted with permission.

origin of the two-part format. As I said, I tend to have what I call a main character, and then a secondary main character. The main character always has the text heavy parts, where you get a little more insight into their lives and into their thought processes. The secondary main character is still in the forefront, but maybe not quite as in the spotlight as the primary main character. Their section is the more condensed graphic novel. This became my template for future books.

Camden and Zullo: Thinking back to what you said about how you created comics to imagine your desire, it's wonderful how you teach your readers to create that alter ego or

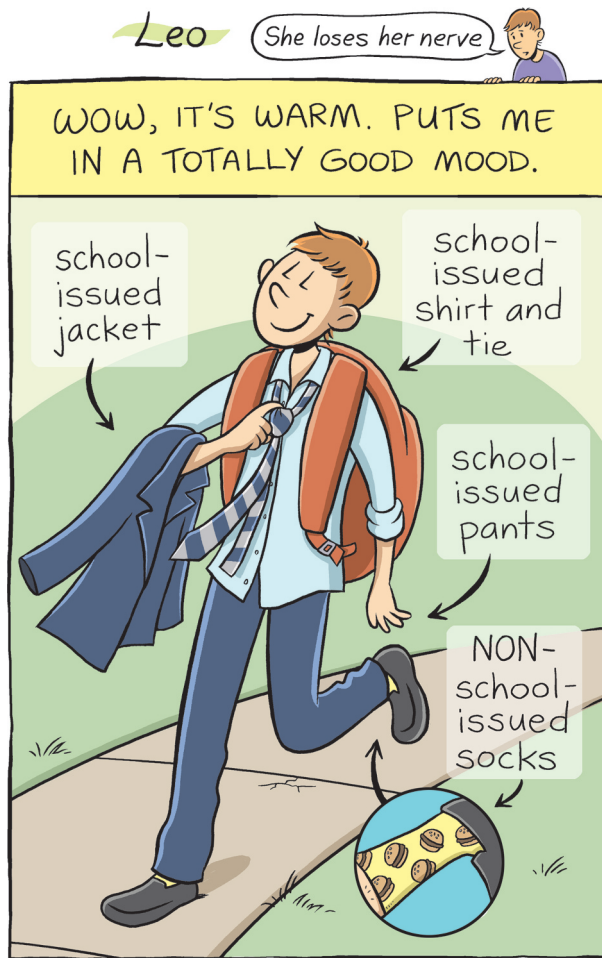


Figure 5. From *Surprisingly Sarah*, 34. Reprinted with permission.

that imaginary version of themselves. At least, in *Invisible Emmie* (but also in some ways *Surprisingly Sarah* with the dual narratives) you are teaching your readers how to do what you did.

Libenson: Oh, yeah. I don't know if I was even doing that consciously. I wrote *Invisible Emmie* so unlike the way I write all my other books. I didn't use any kind of format or outline, there was no structure for that one, I just wanted to give it a shot and see where the writing would take me to just kind of surprise myself. That's exactly what happened. As I wrote, I used my shy, quiet, artistic inner voice from when I was a kid. That's where the autobiographical part comes in. Luckily, a story began to develop, and I thought of a fun surprise ending. It's funny because I no longer work that way at all. By the second book, it became a series and I'm now on a yearly deadline, so I have to have structure. It's funny because I almost miss that aspect of writing Emmie where you don't know what's coming.

Camden and Zullo: She kind of grew on her own.

Libenson: Exactly! At the same time, though, I'm a very structured person, I'm type A, so it kind of goes hand in hand with my personality.

Camden and Zullo: Speaking of planning your books, we were talking beforehand about the fact that in the back of *Surprisingly Sarah*, you say that your readers actually recommended that she lead her own book. We were curious about the role that your readers play for you. Could you also say a bit about readership? What role do your readers play in your creative process? Also, if you don't mind could you also speak to readership when you were a comic strip artist doing *The Pajama Diaries*?

Libenson: Yeah, for the books, I really take my readers' suggestions seriously.

Camden and Zullo: How do they write to you?

Libenson: I have my email listed on my website.

Camden and Zullo: And it sounds like you actually read them.

Libenson: Oh, yeah, I read all the emails. I'll even get snail mail. It's really sweet. I have a PO box. So, they'll send it there. It's all listed on my website.

Camden and Zullo: I was wondering if you have like assistants reading it or something. But you actually . . .

Libenson: Just me. Well, I don't have, like, bulldozers piling in the mail, but there's a nice steady stream. I can't answer them all, but I definitely read them. And I'll take them to heart; almost every single letter that I get will have a suggestion for the next main character. It's really sweet. I noticed a lot of overlap with Sarah. By then I already knew I wanted to write for her. She deserved her own story. She's a very sweet, very empathetic kid. Maybe more so than Emmie, but in a different way. I think Emmie was in her own world and very much worried about herself. Whereas Sarah is a people pleaser. That's another aspect of my personality that I'm still trying to overcome, and I'm pleasing all my readers by using her as the main character! Just joking, I absolutely loved writing for her.

Camden and Zullo: You're exploring what she's thinking, what she needs to develop, where she's going.

Libenson: Exactly. One of the greatest aspects of writing these books is that I switch up the main characters and really get to explore their personalities, just seeing how they emerge as I write. Sometimes they just kind of write themselves. That harkens back to my comic strip. When I first started writing *Pajama Diaries* (Figures 6 and 7), the family members' personalities were supposed to be based on my real-life family's. But oh my gosh, their personalities took off in completely different ways. Strangely, the husband and wife, it's almost as if their personalities switched. My husband is very outgoing and gregarious and I tend to be more of the introvert. They completely swapped in the comic strip and I don't know why. The kids' personalities just took off on their own. It's funny because as a person who likes being in control all the time, this is one part of my job where I feel like I have to let it go. I get to release that control.

Camden: When I first started to teach, it was very forbidden to allow students to talk about the characters as if they're real. I remember rebuking my colleagues for shaming students, because they would talk about Darcy and Elizabeth as if they were really alive. I remember saying, well they are alive! They were alive for Jane Austen. If you read her letters, she's says, when she is at a portrait gallery that she is looking for Mrs. Darcy's portrait and cannot find it because Mr. Darcy would not want his wife to be exposed to the public eye!³ She knows she is writing these characters, but still they're living for her.

Libenson: I mean, the letters that I would get for my comic strip could be very much on par with that – sometimes even get a little scary. Very unlike the letters that I get from my young readers. I was hearing mostly from adults when it came to the comic strip, because it was parent-to-parent humour. It was not really meant for kids, per se, even though a lot of them read it. So, I ended up getting letters of complaint about the strip, especially when people would take the characters' actions to heart. Whereas with the kids, they are letters of love, it's such a turnaround.

Camden and Zullo: That's actually really revealing.

Libenson: If you talk to anyone who's done a syndicated comic strip, it's very difficult. You have to develop a thick skin really fast.

Camden and Zullo: It's a terrible commentary on adult readers. Shifting gears a bit, but one thing we were thinking about, and this is more of a formal question bouncing off the

thought bubble article⁴ we sent you, but we're really interested in the memory bubble that you use in the cartooning.

Libenson: Oh! Wait, which memory bubble?

Camden: It's the way you . . . every time Emmie has a memory you frame it in a different way from her thought.

Libenson: You might have to refresh my memory; it's been a few years.

Camden: It's this: you frame memory in a different shape (Figure 8).

Libenson: Now that you've shown me that, I think the wheels are starting to turn again, slowly, like very rusty wheels. Oh yes, I kind of remember thinking, well they know that this would be from Emmie's memory and not just a thought.

Camden: I rest my case . . . !

Libenson: You're right. Oh my gosh, no one's ever caught that, including myself apparently.

Camden and Zullo: I think it's really important. Formally, meaning for the graphic narrative or novel, because so many talk about how comics is, among other things, capturing trauma and I think what you've done is you've really told your viewer, your reader, that this is something that is returning in memory, and then it affects your characters. It's the way memory is, this is how memory works and it's different than thought.

Libenson: I have to make note, because obviously, this was all very subconscious.

Camden and Zullo: Which is cool. One of the things we really love about these interviews is how generous the artists have been talking to us about their work. A lot of artists and writers don't want to talk. They are the artists or they are the writers and they don't have to talk, right? It's very generous when a creator will actually talk about their process.

Libenson: I honestly can't imagine why not. It's talking shop! Which is always a blast to me.

Camden and Zullo: Is it something about comics creators?

Libenson: I can't think of one comic artist I know who doesn't like to talk about creating comics. Maybe it's because we are in our own little bubbles and we want to commiserate and it's just very hard because we usually work alone.

Camden and Zullo: That was clear in an issue of *Critical Inquiry*⁵ that came out quite a few years ago now where many cartoonists were interviewed and many of these major cartoonists like Art Spiegelman, Justin Green, Robert Crumb, Carol Tyler, Aline Kominsky-Crumb and others clearly had camaraderie, perhaps based on the fact that they were persecuted historically. I think that may be why they have a kind of openness and alliances and affiliation with each other as a team because as a group they had been quite denigrated.

Libenson: Absolutely that's true. In a lighter vein, I'm a member of the National Cartoonist Society where we get together about once a year for the Reuben Award. It's the big Oscars of cartooning and it's basically just drinking and talking shop. Unfortunately, I haven't been there in so long because of the pandemic, obviously, and then schedules and things like that, but it's a limited number of people. It's only in the hundreds. These are comic strip creators, *Mad* magazine cartoonists, editorial cartoonists, and mostly mainstream, not really underground cartoonists; still, they are few and far between and so you kind of need your people. I guess for me personally, that's why I love when I see other graphic novelists or comic creators of any sort. I feel like we're always interested in how each other works, our thought processes and our materials.

Camden and Zullo: When you say that, how you're interested in how each other works, it's obviously also true for us. We're so interested in how each comic, particularly the work that is not mainstream, is so distinct and reflective of the person.

Libenson: Isn't it beautiful?

Camden and Zullo: It is. Speaking of talking shop, what do you think it is about comics that literally draws us in as both readers and creators?

Libenson: Right! Well, I think it's an interesting combination of visual language and writing that really sucks you in. Personally, I was not drawn to conventional books when I was little. Now I'll read anything, but back then, I was just so visually inclined. Like a moth to a flame. I think as far as kids go, there's something about comics, especially today's kids who have grown up with *Dog Man*, *Wimpy Kid* and other comics like that. It's almost a safe haven for them. You know when you start reading comics, middle grade comics especially, there's going to be some levity to it. Even if they're dealing with serious issues, there will probably be beautiful bright colours, lots of expression, and maybe some humour that's going to draw you in. There is a safety factor when, although you don't know exactly what to expect, you do kind of know what you are getting into. I think that offers some hope for them. So even if a book deals with some kind of traumatic event, like in Raina's books where she definitely deals with trauma, she does so with engaging linework, expressions, and humour, as well as her own literary language.

Camden and Zullo: You point to Raina and it's interesting because you both talk about this point about hope in comics. She said in our interview with her that if you see a character experience some type of bad event, if you are holding say 200 pages in your other hand, you realise that that's not the only thing they are going to experience.⁶ That gives the reader some hope. There's something about the convention of the comic too that they know that this isn't going to be it for this character. They going to survive and even thrive. She also points to the varied facial expressions, which you point to as well.

Libenson: There's always that hope. I wonder if it's something innate about comic characters, about the drawing, its simplicity. There must be something that conveys that in and of its nature, and it's hard to pinpoint, but maybe part of it is just seeing that same face repeated over and over. There's that safety net factor again, the consistency and maybe the openness of the drawing, it's so hard to pinpoint.

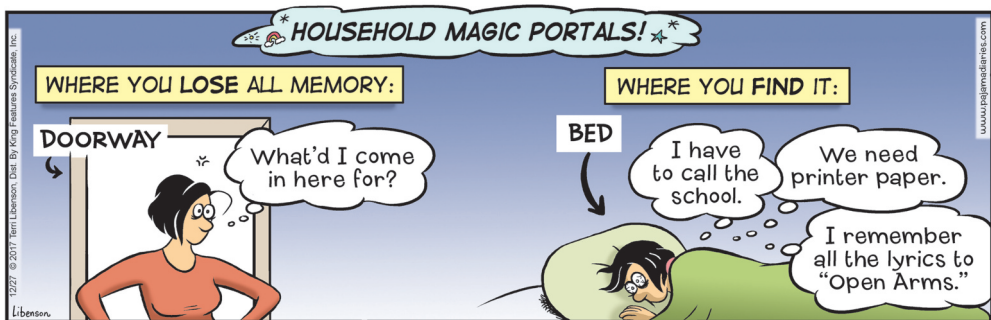


Figure 6. From *Pajama Diaries*, 12/27/2017 Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: What you're saying about the repetition of the face is interesting.

Libenson: I wonder, it's almost like, you see your loved one over and over every day and there's something inherently safe and hopeful that that.

Camden and Zullo: To your point, it's not all comics, but there is something interesting happening in these middle grade comics, especially, and something perhaps in all comics that is particularly buoyant.

Libenson: Yeah. Well, you've got to keep the kids engaged. I think there has to be relatability.

Camden and Zullo: You must get back to a child state.

Libenson: Yeah, absolutely. And there's a longing in all of us to rescue that child.

Camden and Zullo: That takes us to another point we've been thinking about with your work, which is the focus on girls. There's a special way that you capture girls' experience of the joys of their friendships.

Libenson: Well, thank you. I think girls are kind of my speciality. I tell kids in schools, whenever I do presentations, that I don't remember the day to day things I did when I was 12 or 13, but I remember a lot of the feelings I had, and they could be really big feelings, so I try and recreate those. I also raised two girls or helped raise two girls (I guess my husband had some input there too)! Seeing them go through adolescence, and I'm making a very broad-brush statement here, with the whole overthinking and over analysing everything and changing your mind and changing your mind again, which they're completely entitled to do, brought me right back.

So, when it came time to write for Tyler, which is my fifth book (Figure 9), I thought, oh my gosh, I have to start from scratch. How do I write for a boy? It was hilarious because I started overanalyzing that. I was trying to get deep down into the psyche of a 13-year-old boy, I was reading everything and anything I could get my hands on for the study. It was the worst thing I could have done. Then I was starting to miss my deadline because I was rewriting the entire manuscript from start to finish. Finally, something happened where I just kind of took a mental step back and told myself I've got to just keep doing what I've been doing all along, just write from the heart, and then it clicked. I wouldn't say necessarily that Tyler's personality is anything like Emmie's or Sarah's or any of my other female characters, but there's

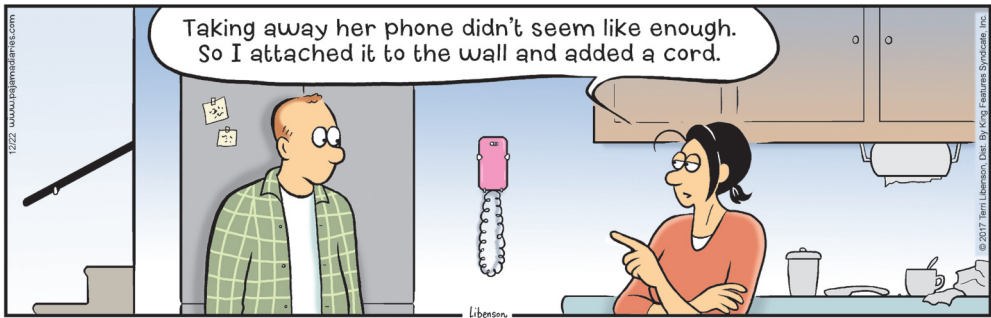


Figure 7. From *Pajama Diaries*, 12/22/2017. Reprinted with permission.

still something there that's inherently the same as the girls. Maybe he doesn't quite overthink or overanalyse everything to the same extent, but he still feels everything because he's an adolescent, and he's a human and ever since then I've been able to write for boys.

Camden and Zullo: Is there any of your brother in that?

Libenson: Oh, I'm not sure about that. Maybe a little, in the one character I'm writing for now. I just finished writing the book and it's still undergoing edits, but he's the kind of character where he tries to play it cool all the time and he doesn't like to express his feelings. I think that happens with girls, too, but it's probably a more common trait among adolescent boys. He wants to project this image of coolness where nothing can really get to him or penetrate him. The story is partially about overcoming that with the help of an unlikely friend, and he helps her in a different way. Maybe at a very subconscious level there's some of my brother coming through, because he could be like that as well.

Camden and Zullo: So what is your process like? Do you start with a feeling and then write a story around it?

Libenson: Sometimes. It really depends on the book that I'm writing. I may have a story in mind, or a format but sometimes the emotions provide the story. For instance, my third book called, *Just Jamie*, was loosely based on something that happened to my older daughter when she was in eighth grade, something that is so universal: being excluded. I remember feeling really angry for my daughter back then. She was dumped by her friend group through a group text, and they went on to list the reasons why they didn't like her. It was brutal. She had a great ending, though. Her former friends from

elementary school were horrified by what happened and took her under their wing again and she's been friends with them ever since.

Camden and Zulo: It was a moment where she really could see who cared about her.

Libenson: Right. So, I thought, what if I told a story that was from the viewpoint of both the excluded kid as well as the one who's doing the excluding. So, it became a very nuanced tale about friendship and all the subtext that lies underneath the whole ordeal.

Camden and Zullo: That happens with Katie as well in *Invisible Emmie*. Katie has to evolve, to have compassion for Emmie. That's a moment of development. In that moment you can see she might well have been in the group that would have been mocking or excluding, but she sees something that she can't deny as being hurtful and she doesn't think it's right. So, it's a moment of her saying no, I will be courageous, I will stand up. That's a revelation. She's a character Emmie creates, but she's a powerful inside helper for her, as she begins to care for herself and recognise her own worth.

Libenson: Absolutely. Absolutely. I still have readers who ask if I'll do another Katie story, or can you bring Katie back?

Camden and Zullo: It's a familiar wish. I think for girls especially that there be a moment of conscience in the popular kid. That that kid will actually have some character.

Libenson: The one thing I am really conscious of doing with these books is trying not to make a typical mean girl character. Okay, there is one mean girl, but I am hoping to turn her into a main character at some point. So that you can see she's multifaceted. Or like Joe! Joe Lungo, who's supposed to be this obnoxious kid who is the class clown who turns out to be multifaceted in his own right. And boy do I get requests for Joe. I'm so scared to turn him into a main character because I think he's going to be the toughest character to write for, because he jokes a mile a minute. That means a lot of work to come up with so many zingers and comebacks. It's also just because I think he would be a real deep dive. But it'd be a good challenge.

Camden and Zullo: It's complicated.

Libenson: It really is and that's why I think one of the reasons I love making characters who are who are fleshed out, different, and multifaceted is because these are the people that kids this age are going to have to deal with in their lives. This is when their personalities are really coming out and burgeoning. I just want kids to realise that, not to be cliché, but there is more than meets the eye with everybody. I hope that's what these books really try and help kids understand.

Camden and Zullo: There's something therapeutic about that for the reader, right? We all still recognise so many of those emotional experiences even if they are not as overwhelming as that first time you experience them.

Libenson: And they're legitimate feelings. Just because we've experienced something doesn't mean that a child has yet, and it can be a lot for them.



Figure 8. From *Invisible Emmie*, 34. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: It's also that a lot of people don't want to remember.

Libenson: Right. They block it out. I thought *I* did. I never even knew I could write these kinds of books. I remember when I first segued into it, I was writing for adults at the time. I had always thought about writing for kids, but maybe picture books for younger kids. I still might, but middle grade didn't even cross my mind. Never.

Camden and Zullo: It's a very rare person who can reach that age. It's so painful for most people. They don't want to teach that group either because it's so painful.

Libenson: And even if you didn't have a particularly traumatic middle school experience there are still things you could reach in and dig up because a lot of them involved hormones, adolescence, growing up, learning responsibility, everything we all go through. Whether it's physical or emotional, there's a lot of pain there. Then there is the fact that you're dealing with hundreds of other kids surrounding you. It's hard. I actually did block a lot of it out because my memory is really soupy, but the feelings – they stay with you. I think that was my saving grace when I first started writing Emmie. In fact, sometimes I think it's a miracle that that I still have more of these stories in me. I'm still channelling my inner 12-year-old and I guess it's got multiple personalities. I use that same method to think about popular kids, too, because I certainly was not at all by any stretch. I was that kid who, like Emmie, tried to be invisible and cower and not draw any attention to myself. Even though part of me was screaming to get out. I definitely sought attention, but I didn't know how to do that. I think that's why I loved art. It was the one area where I could shine. People would heap praise on me, asked me to draw things. It's about the only thing in my life where I would ever get any semblance of visibility.

Camden and Zullo: It's all bundled up in the feelings.

Libenson: Right. Something was repressed until I started writing.

Camden and Zullo: Well, so vividly, too. You recreate it in such a way that you can touch a universal core.

Libenson: With the popular kids, after having some distance, and especially after seeing my kids go through middle school, you start to realise everyone's got that little Emmie inside of them. That everybody is self-conscious about something.

Camden and Zullo: And it returns in your adult life. All this stuff returns.

Libenson: That's true. I think now you're more equipped. I think you have more tools.

Camden and Zullo: And you have more knowledge that you've done it before, so you can do it again.

Libenson: Right, absolutely. Yes. I could get through this cocktail party where I know exactly no one. You've got tools in your toolbox.

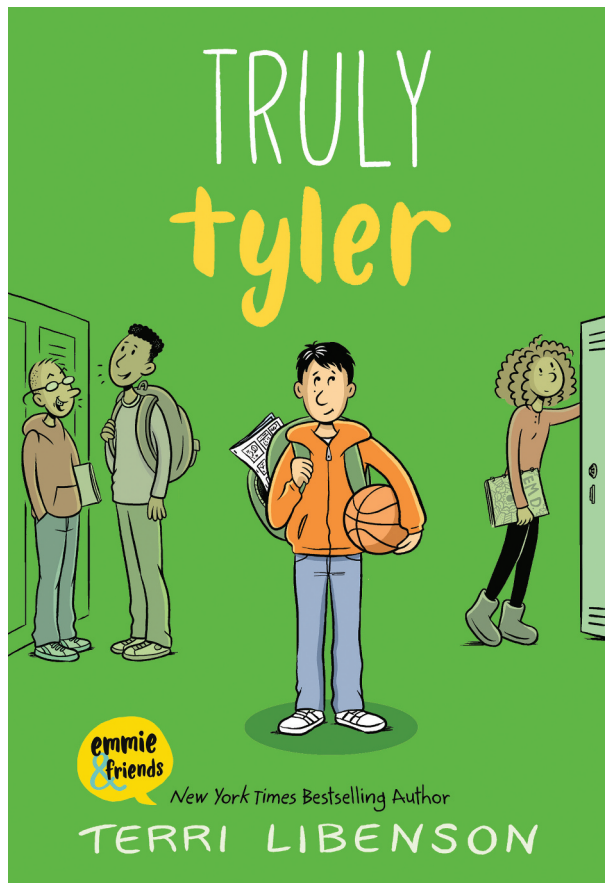


Figure 9. Cover to *Truly Tyler*. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: This has been a lot of fun! Before we finish, can we ask you a few more questions? What is next for you – can you say?

Libenson: To a point. Since the series books take up most of the year, it doesn't allow much time for other things, but I am writing. I just wrote the eighth book in the *Emmie and Friends* series. I've started to illustrate it. Right now, I'm doing the rough art. It's a lot of fun. A little more mindless. I've also got a short story I'm contributing to a Hanukkah themed anthology. One of the authors that was part of the Israel group asked if I would be part of it. So that's nice, because sometimes I want to have something else that's not 'Emmie.' And there are so many projects I've started, but I don't have any time to finish. So that's the one downside, but honestly, the series is such a joy to work on.

Camden and Zullo: It's so nice to have this variety. So, what are you reading or what have you read recently that you want to share?

Libenson: *A First Time for Everything* by Dan Santat. It's his graphic memoir about going to Europe for the first time before high school, and he wrote from his viewpoint as a bullied kid.

Camden and Zullo: How old is he, is he writing from a certain era? Because it's interesting to know what world is he representing? Is it the 70s, the 80s?

Libenson: So, I want to say this is taking place in the late 80s. It's great. What I love about it is it's just one slice of your life. It's that first trip. Like you were saying, first of anything can kind of resonate. It's a great read and beautifully illustrated. He did both the writing and the illustration.

Also, *Play Like a Girl* by Misty Wilson and David Wilson, which is also a graphic memoir. They are a husband and wife team. She writes, he illustrates, and she's actually a teacher as well. So, she is writing about when she joined the boys' football team in middle school and her experiences that surround that. Also, a great read. I also enjoyed Johnnie Christmas's book, *Swim Team*, which is getting so much hype. Those are the three that are off the top of my head. As far as grownup graphic novels go, which I love reading so much, I have quite a collection. *Ducks* by Kate Beaton is a beautiful book.

Camden and Zullo: That's a great book. She really shows how graphic narratives capture memory and trauma. That's what we're kind of interested in really in doing this work, particularly how memory is captured and its timelessness.

Libenson: It's all floating out there. What I love about this form, too, is that you can do anything with it. You can tell your trauma with humour like we were talking about with Raina or you can tell it in a journalistic fashion like Derf Backderf does or some combination. That's just the wonderful thing about comics.

Camden and Zullo: You can also view it as who you are today, and you can view it as whoever you were then through the different narrative tracks. There's something very special about the way that works, which is why it's exploding.

Libenson: It's pretty limitless.

Camden and Zullo: Is there anybody that's particularly influential to you?

Libenson: Well, nowadays, I'm influenced by so many comic artists, but growing up, definitely in college, it was Lynda Barry. She was a huge influence on me.

Camden and Zullo: Did you go somewhere where you were taught Lynda Barry, or did you just find her work?

Libenson: I found her on my own. I was an illustration major, but definitely focused on comics. I was exploring so many different options and I landed on illustration.

Camden and Zullo: Were your professors into comics?

Libenson: To an extent. Some professors were more tolerant than others. Mostly, it was a good experience. I even formed my own cartoon independent study. I just noticed that I kept doing my illustration assignments more and more in a cartoony fashion. I ended up doing my senior project as a comic book. It was huge. It's very embarrassing to look at now, but at the time, I was very proud of it.

Camden and Zullo: Was it a narrative?

Libenson: It was kind of a fantasy. I think the instruction was to reinterpret the five muses, and I personified them as contemporary cartoon characters. It went on this weird, wild, surreal path and I just let my mind go and it was a great deal of work, but also fun.

I still have it somewhere. I actually created a big decorative box for it because the pages were huge. I hand painted everything, very unlike the way I work now.

Camden and Zullo: You were exploring essentially.

Libenson: Absolutely. But yeah, I was heavily influenced by comic creators then. Lynda Barry was my main influence, Berkley Breathed was another big influence that I remember. Before that, growing up, *Peanuts* was my biggest influence. The whole humour/pathos aspect of it as well as the ensemble characters. I think I really identified with Charlie Brown. I can say that now. He's this little hopeful, loser character that I vibed with while aspiring to be imaginative, spontaneous Snoopy. Speaking of comics, I remember in the beginning, going to some of these cartoon events and I'd go with my husband and everyone would – before people knew what I did or who I was – assumed he was the cartoonist.

Camden and Zullo: We talked to Raina about that as well. Comics were supposed to be all about boys, right? She said, that's one of the big things she pushes for is that they are for girls, too.

Libenson: She totally paved the way for that. That's why we call her the Queen. Although she's a very nice Queen.

Camden and Zullo: We did tell her that we were going to talk to you! Alright, on that note, this seems like a good place to stop.

Libenson: Thank you for inviting me. See you soon!

Notes

1. For more about PJ Library, see pjlibrary.org.
2. James Ellis, 'How J.K. Rowling Created Harry Potter,' in *Newsweek Special Edition, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter*, October 16, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/how-jk-rowling-created-harry-potter-510042>
3. Austen played the same game when she attended an exhibition of paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds at the Royal Academy at Somerset House. 'Mrs. Darcy' once again proved elusive. A disappointed Austen told Cassandra that 'I can only imagine that Mr D. prizes any Picture of her too much to like it should it be exposed to the public eye.' Darcy, she believed, would regard Elizabeth with a mixture of 'Love, Pride & Delicacy.' Meredith Hindley, 'The Mysterious Miss Austen,' *Humanities* 34, no. 1 (2013), <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2013/januaryfebruary/feature/the-mysterious-miss-austen>

4. See Vera J. Camden, 'The thought bubble and its vicissitudes in contemporary comics,' *American Imago* 77, no. 3 (2020): 603–638.
5. Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda, eds., 'Comics & Media,' *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2014).
6. Camden, Vera J., and Valentino L. Zullo. "I don't know how to process experiences unless I put them into comics': an interview with Raina Telgemeier." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2023): 1-22.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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