

BOOKS AND IDEAS PODCAST

with Ginger Campbell, MD

Episode #17

**Interview with Writer and Podcaster, Mur Lafferty, Author of the
Novel, *Playing for Keeps***

Aired February 26, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

This is *Books and Ideas*, and I'm your host, Dr. Ginger Campbell. *Books and Ideas* is the podcast where I talk about everything that doesn't fit in my other podcast the [Brain Science Podcast](#). We talk about books, philosophy, history, science, and we do interviews with interesting people.

You can learn more at the website, booksandideas.com. You can send me feedback by writing to me at docartemis@gmail.com or by visiting the Discussion Forum at brainscienceforum.com, which has its own section for *Books and Ideas*.

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This is Episode 17. Today's episode is an interview with Mur Lafferty. Mur is an aspiring fiction writer. She is best known in the podcasting community as one of the pioneers. And she is the coauthor with Rob Walch of *Tricks of the Podcasting Masters*. In this interview we're going to talk about her latest novel and we are also going to talk a little bit about podcasting.

If you are at all interested in trying podcasting yourself, I think you'll find this interview very informative. And I know that you're going to enjoy getting to meet Mur. I'll have a few announcements at the end of the interview, and then the last part of this episode is going to be Part One of the audio version of Mur's new book, *Playing for Keeps*—which is at about 30:32, if you decide you want to fast-forward to listen to that.

So, let's get into Mur's interview.

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INTERVIEW

GC: My guest today is Mur Lafferty. Mur, I want to welcome you to *Books and Ideas*.

ML: Thanks for having me.

GC: You are the first fiction writer I have interviewed. I'm not even sure that I know how to interview a fiction writer, but I'm going to give it a try.

ML: OK, great. I don't think we're that much different.

GC: No, I know. I'm just used to asking people about details of their book, which I assume one wouldn't do when interviewing a fiction writer, since you wouldn't want to give away the stuff that's in the book.

ML: Well, we can talk about the general plot line—that’s not going to hurt.

GC: I thought maybe we could start out by just talking a little bit about writing in general. Can you tell me and my listeners when you first started writing?

ML: Well, when I first remember I was probably about 12, just starting to throw down some ideas—some very dreadful ideas involving unicorns and all of my best friends. My dad let me use this Brother word processor that he’d bought. And I just started writing; starting a novel because no one told me I couldn’t. And then I wrote a little bit in high school, and then more in college. But then I kind of stopped when I got into the corporate world; and then started again around 2000, 2001.

GC: And recently you’ve made a renewed commitment to your career as a writer.

ML: Yes. I got laid off in December, and it’s been my dream to do this—to stay home and write full-time—and so, I decided to do so.

GC: Of course, you have the Pink Tornado.

ML: Yes. My daughter is five. She’s in school now, so that leaves most of my days free—most of the hours free.

GC: Is it true the more time you have the harder it is to actually make good use of it?

ML: It’s really hard. I’m very fond of the saying: If you want something done ask somebody who has a hundred things to do, because they can fit it in; but if you ask somebody who has nothing to do, they’ll procrastinate and they’ll find things to fill up their time, so they won’t do it.

Yes, I don't have any excuses left. I do have a podcast to get out every Thursday—*Playing for Keeps*—and I am in charge of the domestic stuff in the house, so those two are important. But really, beyond that, nothing is stopping me from getting writing done unless it's something of my own device. And that's kind of scary, actually.

GC: So, you've just published your first novel.

ML: Well, kind of. I released three novellas via podioobooks.com, called the *Heaven Series*—*Heaven*, *Hell*, and *Earth*. Then I did *Playing for Keeps*, which I also released via print-on-demand through lulu.com. I kind of see *Heaven* and *Hell* as one novel, so that was already done. But the first thing in print was *Playing for Keeps*.

GC: And you've been promoting this novel in a very unique way.

ML: Yes. I've been working on getting a Street Team together; seeing if people could help me out with the promotion. And I've also been releasing every episode out in PDF format. A lot of people have asked me before when I've podcasted fiction if they could print it out and read it, because they're interested in the story but they don't really like listening to audio, or they have somebody who doesn't have an iPod, or various reasons. And I thought, well why not do that? So, I have friends who lay it out for me—do an excellent job doing that—and we release that, as well as the episode.

GC: You've got some really great artwork in those PDFs too, don't you?

ML: Yes. That's Jared Axelrod and Natalie Metzger. They're both doing some fantastic covers for me. It's amazing what they do.

GC: Are they also making your icons—the ones that people are using on Twitter?

ML: Most of that is Jared Axelrod's. A couple of them are fan-made, but Jared has done most of them. He's done all the official hero logos. Jared has done so much awesome work for this podcast. It's been unbelievable.

GC: Is there someone that's inspired you to take this approach to promoting this book?

ML: Well, I've been watching other people do it for awhile, and seeing what works and what doesn't. I finished this book, final draft, in December 2006, and decided I would do a 10-month agent hunt: because you've got to give agents awhile to get back to you. So, I did a big push and got a whole bunch of letters out. And if I didn't find an agent I decided I was going to publish it online.

And so, in those 10 months in searching for the agents I had a lot of time to think about what I was going to do. This was kind of 10 months in the planning of what would go into it. And there were some ideas that just never came true. I wanted to get Keepsie's Bar built in Second Life, and that never really happened. So, that's really it—mostly the Second Life thing. But everything else happened, and it happened better than I ever could have considered it.

Chris Miller has been doing a Fancast for me called *Stories of the Third Way*, which is sometimes fanfic, it's sometimes superhero music, but it's just fantastic. I was actually just running the idea by Chris last summer when I saw him. And he called me a couple of days after we both got home from the convention, and he's like, 'You know I'd like to do this.'

And I was just floored. I said, 'Oh. Well, OK, that'll make it a lot easier. I won't have to look for anybody now.' So, we've got that side-cast and we've got the PDF; and I wrote a connected story, but you don't need to be reading the novel to get the story, and it doesn't give any spoilers.

GC: Is that the story about Barry?

ML: No. Well, that's one of them. That's a story I podcasted a couple of years ago. But this is a video blog I wrote to tell the story of a younger superpowered kid, and how he's dealing with his life in hiding. That has four episodes; and I just posted the fourth one a couple of days ago on YouTube, but I haven't put it in the feed yet.

GC: I hadn't really thought about it, but you're right, there aren't any spoilers in there. Well, speaking of spoilers, I suspect that most of my listeners aren't familiar with your work at all—which is one reason why I wanted to get you on the show. Do you want to tell them just a little bit about what *Playing for Keeps* is about?

ML: Sure. *Playing for Keeps* is a superhero novel that takes place in a world where there are people with awesome superpowers, but there are also people with kind of lame superpowers. And the people with awesome superpowers get to be heroes, and the people with lame superpowers just are kind of powered people that live life just like you and I do. They kind of get bitter, the way the geeks got bitter in high school with the prom queens and the basketball stars. They don't really like the heroes.

They're not evil, but they don't really like the superheroes. And then my characters get manipulated, because there are some villains who believe that their powers actually are useful, and they can be manipulated by using their bitterness, to help them out. My protagonists kind of get caught in the middle of the bullying heroes and the manipulative villains.

GC: What was the inspiration? Are you a big fan of the superhero genre? Or do you hate it? Or in between?

ML: No, I love it. I do find that the characters with more depth are much more interesting. Batman and Spider-Man are interesting. I find that the non-Marvel,

non-DC stories are my favorite—Astro City, Powers, top-ten kind of. It's a little weird, but I enjoy reading it.

But the inspiration actually just came from real life superpowers—you know, the person who can always get the parking space close to the store, or the person who the streetlights go out every time they drive by. I had a friend who was always good at summoning the elevator at a con, where it was notoriously difficult to get the elevators. Every time he pushed the button the elevator came. And I thought, wow, that's a really completely pointless but rather useful power.

That kind of got my mind going. Like why are superpowers always the miraculous amazing ones that can fight crime? Why don't you have a superpower that means you can change the color of the paint in the room, or something like that? Why does it always have to be super-strength, and super-speed, and flying, and all that? So, that pretty much was the inspiration, and then I moved on from there.

GC: Well I have to say the thing I like the best about the book so far—of course, I don't know how it ends, because I haven't gotten to the end yet—is that it's full of quirky surprises. It's not predictable.

ML: Well, I'm glad you think so.

GC: To me it's not predictable. And I was trying to read this book, *Atonement* (the one the movie is based on) the other day. And I'm not a Jane Austin fan—I think it must be something only a Jane Austin person could like—but you could just see what was going to happen. And when the third predictable thing happened I said, that's it, I've had enough of this. I like the unpredictable—and your sense of humor.

ML: Oh, thank you. I never really set out to write humorous fiction, but it kind of seeps in there. So, once I realized it was getting in there I decided to just leave it in there and see where I could go.

GC: One question that has come to my mind—you can tell me if you want me to edit this out—but in your writing you sometimes use colorful language. And I'm curious, since you have a five-year-old, do you have any trouble with censoring yourself in real life around your child?

ML: Well, I've been trying to censor myself ever since she was born. It's sometimes difficult, but I swear a lot less now than I did before she was born. You know, I was trying to base the dialogue off of the way my friends and I used to talk when we were childless and hanging around in bars. That's how it came out.

I've had some people comment on that. And I even had somebody tell me that it might be a good YA book if I would cut out the language. So, I've considered that. But I don't know; I have foul-mouthed friends, so it never really made me blink.

GC: Well, no, let me say that I think the dialogue feels very real. I can remember as a young adult seeing a movie—which I don't know if anyone even ever sees this movie anymore—but there was this movie, *Silver Streak*, where it seemed like all the characters did was cuss for no apparent reason. That bothers me. But as long as it's the way a person would talk in real life it doesn't bother me.

But I don't have kids. And that's why I asked that; because I just wondered what would happen when you got kids. It seems like it would be a challenge.

ML: Yes, it is tough. I have a friend who, I'm not sure if she does censor herself, and I think when her child starts to talk she might get a little surprise. But I try my hardest.

GC: When you were a little kid were you a big reader? Did you like to read?

ML: Oh, yes. All the time. I got in trouble once for bringing too many books on a vacation.

GC: Is there anything else you want to say about *Playing for Keeps* or any of your other books before I change the subject a little bit?

ML: I don't think so. It's at playingforkeepsnovel.com. And it's almost done. It'll be done on Valentine's Day. So, if any of your listeners are the kind of people who like to wait until something is completely done before they get involved with it, that might appeal to them.

[music]

GC: As I have told you enough times that I know you're bored of listening to me say it, you were the person who inspired me to get into podcasting. So, obviously I want to talk to you a little bit about podcasting. You are considered one of the pioneers of podcasting. You know that, don't you?

ML: Yes. It's weird, but yes, I'm kind of aware of it. It's still a strange thing to me. I got started in December of 2004, I guess. Podcasting kind of started up in August, and I became aware of it in October and then started my own podcast in December. I've just been fooling around with audio since then, trying to see what I can do—what different things I can do with it, what I can offer people, how to involve the community, stuff like that. But, thank you.

GC: Is your podcasting book still available?

ML: Yes. I co-wrote *Tricks of the Podcasting Masters* with Rob Walch; and that was named one of Amazon's top ten research books for 2006. It's not about the craft of podcasting—not just, you know, 'insert your mixer, plug here, and turn

these knobs.’ It was a lot of fun to write. We interviewed a lot of really good podcasters, and I think the stuff in it is still timely. So, yes, it’s still available. Go to Amazon or maybe your local bookstore in the tech section.

GC: I’m going to put a link to it. I actually have a little sort of mini store inside of Amazon for my podcast, so I’ll put it in there.

ML: Cool.

GC: One of the things I liked about your book—and I’m also a fan of T. Morris’s book—but one of the things I liked about your book was that it really captured the spirit of podcasting: especially the early podcasters. And then the fact that you talked to so many different podcasters and gave people a sense of the fact that there could be so much diversity.

ML: Oh, yes. We talked to the Godcasters, and we talked to the qPodder people (the gay podcast network), and gamers, and interviewers, and science fiction writers, and all sorts of people. We tried to hit a wide variety. My co-author, Rob, is the host of the *podCast411* podcast, so he interviews people frequently. And so, he took a lot of his part of the book from those interviews.

GC: Yes. And he’s also a person who puts a lot of energy into helping new podcasters get started.

ML: Oh, yes, he’s totally involved. It’s amazing. Just watching him work is awesome.

GC: He’s helped me out a lot over the year-and-a-half or so I’ve been podcasting. And I guess now in a way I work with him, since my podcast is on Wizzard, where he’s working now. What do you think about the changes in podcasting that have happened since you started?

ML: I don't think any of it is a surprise. I mean we knew that larger media would get into it and sort of take over immediately, because people find out. If the *Lost* fans find out there's an official *Lost* podcast, they might subscribe to that one and then nothing else. And once NPR put their shows up via podcast, that was like 15 of the top 20 were all NPR shows. And the independent people have kind of gotten pushed to the side. But none of that is really a surprise.

I think that the way media is changing, that is somewhat of a surprise. It's something that I think publishers and television are going to have to look at pretty soon. And those who figure it out and embrace it are going to be ahead of the ones who wait. I think it's a lot like the Internet was 15 years ago—people always wanted to know, well, if I have a website how is that going to make me money?

And you say, well, if you have a billboard no one's going to drop by the billboard and drop coins into the slot for the pleasure of viewing your billboard. It's an exposure, it builds brand, it's just another way of getting your message and you out there. I think once people figure out that's one of the best things podcasting does, I think it's going to get even bigger.

GC: Do you have time to listen to any podcasts yourself?

ML: Yes, I try to. I listen in the car. I listen to some when my daughter is with me, and others when she's not. I listen when I'm doing stuff in the house that doesn't require computer work.

GC: Yes, I don't understand people who can work on their computer and listen to a podcast. At least the kind of podcast I like to listen to, that's not going to be happening.

ML: Yes. I think a lot of people who do visual work on computers can do that, but anybody who has to do writing or any sort of looking at words, it's going to

get mixed up with your brain and what you're listening to vs. what you're writing. And that's just not going to work.

GC: You started out in podcasting when you actually had to figure out how to do your own RSS feeding code and all that kind of stuff?

ML: Yes. That was interesting. I found out that a lot of blog software actually just does it for you. I think *Geek Fu* started out in WordPress. Yes, it started out with WordPress—it's a different WordPress theme now. But once I discovered that WordPress kind of does it for you and I also discovered that Blogger does it for you—which is where I hosted my other podcast for awhile, *I Should Be Writing* – I don't know anybody who hand codes their RSS anymore.

GC: No, but I'm glad that there are people like Rob who can read the code and figure out when your feed's being hijacked.

ML: Oh, yes. I'm still not very good at the technical side. I can make my mixer do what it needs to do and my Audacity do what it needs to do, but I'm not very good at giving tech support when it comes to feeds or other people's tech stuff.

GC: So, as a writer I know you spend a lot of time on editing. Do you spend a lot of time on editing when you do your podcast?

ML: Oh, yes. I definitely try to edit. I don't script, so there are a lot of pauses and 'ums,' and I'm just not one of those people that can just talk. A lot of stuff needs to be edited out. A lot of times when I'm speaking about podcasting or writing I'll get tripped up, and explain that this is why I like editing—it's why I like podcasting: you can make yourself sound really smooth.

GC: And you can make your guests sound really smooth.

ML: Excellent.

GC: I don't think people that listen to podcasts and don't do them appreciate how much time is spent on editing.

ML: Yes, I think a lot of people think that podcasts are easy to do and therefore they should get into it. And when they discover how difficult it is—it's not difficult as in skill, it just takes up a lot of time—I think they're surprised at that.

GC: Well, I remember the first time I heard your podcast and several others, and I was like, I want a podcast! And I got out GarageBand, and the first time I tried to record I went, this is hard! I think we might have had a small exchange of emails back then that I'm sure you don't remember. I mean I was discouraged.

I think I went another year before I actually came up with an idea that I felt strongly enough about to get past that hump. So, it wasn't a surprise to me, because I'd dipped my finger into it before I committed. And then there's the time you spend with the community aspects of your website: the emails, the forums, that kind of thing that you need to build your podcast.

ML: Yes, that part is absolutely necessary. You have to be in contact with your community, because the more you respond to them the more they'll respond to you. I know one of the biggest complaints of new podcasters is nobody's getting any feedback; and, 'I know people are listening, because I'm getting downloads, but nobody's giving me any feedback.' You've got to respond to the little feedback you get. You've got to ask for it on your show, and keep asking for it. And that is one thing that will get your community interested.

I think one of my biggest problems is not responding to posts on the blog. I don't really know why; I just don't do it. I really can't explain it. I always respond to emails and I try to play voice mails on the show. But it's good to respond to the blog, and I need to do that more. You've got to be in touch with your community, and the more you're in touch with them the more they'll evangelize for you.

GC: That's one of the reasons I got into podcasting was for the opportunity to be connected. I mean what's really cool is getting emails from people from places that surprise you. I have a science podcast, and they're listening to a science podcast in English and they speak Dutch or something. It amazes me that they can do that.

ML: Yes, that's one of the best things is just learning about people around the world who are listening to you. And then sometimes it'll affect how you talk, because you'll be talking about an American holiday and realize that part of your listenership is not going to know what you're talking about, or you'll be complaining about the weather and then you realize your listeners in Australia are experiencing the exact opposite weather, and things like that. It's really a global form of communication.

GC: Have you had anybody write to you and say something like, 'I'm glad that you speak slow like a Southerner, because it helps me since I don't speak English as my first language.'?

ML: I'm not sure. I don't think anybody's commented on my speed of talking. A lot of people don't know that I'm a native Southerner. I don't really have a huge accent.

GC: Well, neither do I. In fact, people who live in the South don't think I have a Southern accent; but people who don't know any better do.

ML: Well, no. People have complimented me on my voice before, but not the speed. What about you?

GC: Yes. It surprises me when somebody does that, because I think that most of us hate our own voice. That's the first hump you have to get over if you're going to podcast.

ML: Exactly. It really is. Everyone's just, 'Oh, I couldn't do it, I hate my own voice.' I'm thinking, well how do you think I feel about mine? I think it sounds awful. It's something you just have to deal with. You only have to listen when you're editing, and then you never have to listen to it again. And if other people like it, well that's awesome.

GC: Of course, by the time you're done editing you're pretty sick of it.

ML: Yes, definitely.

GC: Well, Mur, I guess I've taken up more of your time than you promised me. I don't even remember if we talked about how much of your time you would promise.

ML: I don't think so. But it's been fun.

GC: You have a couple of really good stories on [Escape Pod](#). Would you mind telling the names of those? Because I've listened to both of those and they were great, and I'd like for my listeners to be able to track those down. So, will you brag about those for a minute?

ML: Oh, sure. Thank you. I've done the Christmas story on *Escape Pod* three years running. That was "Santa in My Pocket," and then, "Merry Christmas from the Heartbreakers," and then this year it was, "City Talkers." And then last year I had, "I Look Forward to Remembering You," which is a time travel sex worker story.

GC: I've heard—what was the last one, "City Talkers"?

ML: Yes, that was the one that was this past Christmas.

GC: Yes. I've heard that one. And I loved "I Look Forward to Remembering You." That one has your trademark quirky surprises.

ML: Well, thank you. That one was fun to write. It's going to be adapted to video for StrangerThings.tv which is the science fiction HD Vidcast. That will be on this year—"I Look Forward to Remembering You" in video.

GC: Are you going to make any money off of that?

ML: I don't think so. But it's still going to be pretty awesome exposure.

GC: That's good. So, if any of my listeners would like to find you, where would they go?

ML: murlafferty.com is where all of my stuff currently lives. And then you can get to any of my podcasts from there. But there's also playingforkeepsnovel.com, heavennovel.com, ishouldbewriting.com. So, I have too many URLs.

GC: OK. Well, great. Thanks a lot, Mur.

ML: Well, sure. Thank you, Ginger.

[music]

I want to thank Mur for coming on *Books and Ideas*, and apologize to her for the delay between when we recorded this interview and when I finally got it up into the feed. For those of us who didn't start out in radio but came to podcasting from scratch, Mur has been a very important inspiration. Thanks again, Mur.

If you don't know Mur's work I hope you will check it out. By the time this episode comes out you should be able to find links to all of the things we talked about in the Show Notes at booksandideas.com. If you enjoy sci-fi or fantasy, and

enjoy writing with a good sense of humor a la Connie Willis, then I highly suggest that you check out Mur's work.

Before I play the excerpt from Mur's book to close out this episode I want to just say a little bit about what's going to be coming up on *Books and Ideas*. The next episode, which will be out sometime next month, is going to be an interview of Tabitha Grace Smith. Tabitha is also very involved in podcasting, and she is the one that gave me the opportunity to have my recent bit part on [Buffy Between the Lines](#). We're going to talk about why we love the work of Joss Whedon, and also we will talk some more about podcasting.

Recently I promised that there was going to be an episode reviewing David Halberstam's book, *The Coldest Winter*, and I just haven't had time to put that together. I think that what's probably going to happen is that eventually it's going to end up as a mini book review in the blog portion of the *Books and Ideas* website. I apologize for that. I suggest that you read David Halberstam's book, *The Coldest Winter*. I highly recommend it.

Right now what I'm listening to on [Audible.com](#) is Joseph Ellis's new book, *American Creation*. I appreciate the ongoing sponsorship of Audible.com and, as I mentioned before, you can get a free audiobook download if you click on the ad on the website.

For those of you who are new and maybe came to listen to Mur—because I know Mur has a lot more fans than I do—I hope that you will check out my other podcast, the [Brain Science Podcast](#), which is for everyone who has a brain. On the *Brain Science Podcast* I talk about how recent discoveries in neuroscience are unraveling the mysteries of how our brains make us who we are.

And it is really a show for everyone. You don't have to have a scientific background to enjoy it. The *Brain Science Podcast* has an active Discussion

Forum, which I mentioned in the introduction, at brainscienceforum.com. You can leave feedback about *Books and Ideas* in the special section on that forum, or you can write to me at docartemis@gmail.com.

I would like to tell you some more about what I'm going to be doing with *Books and Ideas* in the coming months. But to be honest with you, at this point I'm really not sure, because the *Brain Science Podcast* is taking up an increasingly large amount of my limited free time. But I would love to hear your ideas about what you would like to see.

So, now I'm going to play for you the first part of Mur's new novel, *Playing for Keeps*, which you can find at podioobooks.com or at playingforkeepsnovel.com. I'll talk to you again soon. Bye.

[music]

Note: This episode closed with the first chapter of the audio version of *Playing for Keeps*. Since Mur actually published this book several months after her interview, that transcription was not included here. Please visit <http://playingforkeepsnovel.com> to learn how to purchase your own copy.

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