

**Greetings from Nelsonville interview – Hosted by Kristina Carmela – published on Jan 8, 2024**

(starts at 10:18)

Kristina Carmela	First off, thank you so much for hanging out with me. Why don't you start off and tell us how you got into writing in the first place?
Merlina Garance	I think I started writing stories as soon as I knew how to physically write. The first things I wrote were the bedtime stories that my dad used to tell us. I would make little booklets out of them!
Kristina	I love that, that's so sweet!
Merlina	And then in secondary school I remember just finishing one exam early and having lots of paper left, and I was bored and just picked up a pen and started writing a story! And then I made a blog and things went on from there.
Kristina	I love that, do you still have all those bedtime stories that you wrote as a kid?
Merlina	(Laughs) I think my mom must have them yeah.
Kristina	(Laughs) It's a mom thing to keep! That's so sweet. So at what point, since you've been writing as a kid, did you decide that it was time to write a book that would be shared with the world?
Merlina	<p>I wrote my first novel between 2016 and 2019 (took me some time to get through the first one) and that one is still sitting in my drawers because it's in French, and I would like to get that one traditionally published but I've stopped querying two years ago because I had a lot going on. And now that I'm also self-publishing and writing in English, I just haven't found the time again.</p> <p>I've actually been sharing my stories for a long time because as soon as I started writing stories I had a blog and posted them online.</p> <p>The first novel was also an investigation and also had queer characters and themes but it's a lot heavier than anything I've published.</p>
Kristina	That's fair! Why don't you tell us about... So <i>The Flourishing</i> was the first one that you self published, right?
Merlina	Yes!

Kristina	So why don't you tell us about that book?
Merlina	So it's also an investigation, but it has a lot more romance mixed with it. It's also the first ever story I ever wrote from the point of view of a woman, which was quite big for me.
Kristina	Oh, okay!
Merlina	<p>I actually wrote an article about that but I think I wasn't managing to write from a female point of view before because I was in denial about my own sexuality. As soon as I made peace with that, it just clicked and I was magically able to! So yeah it's the story of Andy, who's a Scottish, female [police] officer who lives in Leicester, UK. She's put on the case of a missing person who's a regular British guy. But then she goes and meets his wife, and falls in love with her.</p> <p>The story about the missing man becomes a lot more complicated and turns into a criminal investigation instead.</p>
Kristina	<p>I love that, that's so interesting! That sounds so fun. I love for you... writing is such a deeply personal thing and if you don't sit and write you don't really understand just how writing from the right character is such a big deal. Because you become a part of that, you're telling their story. So I love that you.. it all clicked for you for this book, I love that you had that moment and that chance to write from this character.</p> <p>So this is the first book of a trilogy and you're writing similar to... I'm writing a series and every book kind of bounces between characters, and all within a friend group too, similar to you.</p> <p>So can you tell us how you chose those next main characters and how they all intertwine within the trilogy?</p>
Merlina	<p>The decision to make that into a series came when I wrote the first book. There's Andy who's the main police officer, but she works very closely with her colleague Claire. And halfway through the book I realised I wanted to tell more about Claire, and I also wanted her to have her own book.</p> <p>But I didn't know exactly what, by then. I also didn't want to let</p>

	<p>go of Andy and Thalia yet, so I decided that I would write three books and each of them can ideally be read as a standalone. But obviously if you want to read them all in order you'll pick up on some little things that are more fun that way.</p> <p>So the next one is called <i>Just Stu</i> (which is hard for me to pronounce, I always end up saying 'Just two, but it's also the second book so that works!)</p> <p>It follows John who has just moved into the same building as Andy, so he's her neighbour. And he sort of becomes unlikely friends with Thalia. (So this is spoilers for the end of <i>The Flourishing</i>) (Laughs)</p>
Kristina	It's okay!
Merlina	<p>I don't know how much I can say but yeah obviously the second book is gonna have spoilers for the first one. And then [John] joins their friend group, and he meets Stu, and they become best friends really quickly but obviously there are more feelings that develop over time.</p> <p>Claire, Andy, all the first main characters are really present in this one, it's more like an ensemble cast, the second one.</p>
Kristina	I love that.
Merlina	Which was really fun to write and also quite different to what I'm used to because I'm a very 'one POV girl'.
Kristina	(Laughs) Me too!
Merlina	<p>But it was really fun to expand, have more characters to develop.</p> <p>And the third one that comes out next month uh... so actually in December [2023] is about Claire's story and falling in love with another colleague.</p>
Kristina	As an author who is doing something similar I love it but I'm doing it because as a reader I love that. I love when you have that group of characters that just like you said you're not ready to leave yet, because they're so special. I love those kinds of series but again you can read solo but they're better when you

	<p>read them all in order. And I just think it's so sweet to have those characters that are meaningful and relatable and I feel like this makes you feel that you're part of that friend group even more.</p>
Merlina	<p>That's been part of the response I've gotten from readers, that they feel like friends after a while.</p>
Kristina	<p>Which is half the fun of reading! I want to escape and I want to feel cosy and at home and like I'm hanging out with my friends. That's the kind of escape that I like in books so I feel that's something special and not every book series can do that either. So I love that.</p> <p>So on top of that you also have – and we can hear it when you are talking about the characters – all kinds of representation and I think that's super super important. We need to see more of it in books.</p> <p>Why don't you tell us a bit more about what kind of representation your characters portray?</p>
Merlina	<p>Yeah, sure. Andy identifies as a lesbian woman and so does her partner, and so does Claire (laughs) so the first book was all lesbian ladies.</p> <p>And then with the second book where I introduced more characters I focused more on sort of my own experience which was growing up queer and not knowing I was.</p> <p>So having these feelings that you're not sure if it's just friendship or not but you're not ready to qualify that yet either.</p> <p>So I wrote John and Stu both as pansexual but I never label them on page. Because at the point where they're at in their story they don't have a label for themselves. And I also wrote them as demisexual so they don't feel that sort of really strong attraction for someone unless there's also a really strong friendship, which is the way their story unfolds.</p>
Kristina	<p>I love that.</p>
Merlina	<p>So those two characters have identities that they're figuring out.</p>
Kristina	<p>I have one character – she's a main character in my third book – and she's similar where she doesn't realise that she's bisexual until she's like, 29. And I think it's so important</p>

	<p>because we expect people to know who they are when they're 15 or 16 and come out in highschool and that's not the case for a lot of people.</p> <p>So I think that's something that's really important to have in books – that that experience can happen at any point in time.</p>
Merlina	<p>Yeah! And it was also very important for me to show that it can end happily, that they find the love they deserve at 40. All of my characters are over 40. They're late bloomers but it's great.</p> <p>And I also forgot to mention that I have some disability rep too. So, John has scoliosis which is also my case. It was also interesting/painful to write because I had to remind myself what it's like. And one of the characters (well, maybe several) have PTSD from past abuse. It's not a plot point it's just part of them.</p>
Kristina	<p>Right, it's just a piece of who they are! I love that, I think it's really important to share all these different variations of people. As I've grown up and I've been reading more and more the books I was reading when I was younger I was like 'oh, they're much more one dimensional' which is fine! I still enjoyed reading them at that time. But now I'm older and I want to relate to characters, I want them to understand me and I want to understand them and the only way you can do that, especially as you get older, all these things happen and change and you become who you really are supposed to be.</p> <p>So seeing more characters like that in the world is pretty awesome, so I love that you're doing your thing!</p>
Merlina	<p>Yeah it's really important for me to write characters that have flaws and are not perfect, and they still get a happy ending. Cause that's what we want to hope for ourselves as well.</p>
Kristina	<p>You're right and you shouldn't have to be this perfect... And even the timeline right, I love that you said they're 40 and they're still getting their happy endings like... In the real world there is no real timeline for what's gonna happen for you but...</p> <p>We see it happen, people hit 25 and they have it all, in movies and TV and stuff... And it's... I always say when I look back, the person I thought I was gonna be when I was 15... if 15 year old Kristina could have told you what her life would have been like, it would have been very different! (Laughs)</p> <p>But it also would have been just based on what the world told</p>

	me what it supposed to happen for me, and by when.
Merlina	And it's a lot of pressure too!
Kristina	<p>Yeah, and it gets hard to reconcile! When I hit 25 all of my friends were married or engaged and I'm still just the single friend in our friend group. (Laughs) So it gets hard at some point, the world told me that I was supposed to be married and have kids and a house by now and... I don't! (Laughs) So it's nice to find characters that are on their own timeline and they're getting happy endings too.</p> <p>So now what are some of your favourite parts of your characters and the trilogy and how they all intertwine together? Cause you said they are standalones but you said there are little things to tie them together, too.</p>
Merlina	<p>Actually one of the things that I loved writing the most and was quite a surprise for me was John's friendship with Thalia who is the wife in the first book and ends up with Andy. Because she has a lot of trauma linked to men, her husband was abusive and violent. And he was also named John so at first she's very skittish around... the <i>good</i> John (laughs), the one that we like. And he doesn't know why so he just ends up being very patient and cautious around her and just lets her take her time. And writing that, and getting them to eventually become best friends and her having so much trust for him it was very healing for her character. And it was not something I'd planned, but I really loved writing that platonic love as well.</p>
Kristina	Which I also love. I love as a writer when you find these unexpected friendships!
Merlina	Yeah like you haven't imagined them together and then they're on page together and they click. And you're like "okay!"
Kristina	<p>(Laughs)</p> <p>Yeah you're like "how did this happen, how did we get here?"</p> <p>I think that's sweet. And I love that they have that cause again the mainstream world tells us that men and women can't be just platonic friends without having any feelings for each other regardless of who they're attracted to or anything. I like that you've created this nice platonic relationship for people to see and... I have tons of platonic guys friends who, nothing's ever</p>

	<p>happened, you know, scandalously (laughs). So it's nice to also see that.</p> <p>So, not that that's representation in a way but, it's nice to explore all the different kinds of relationships people can have with each other.</p>
Merlina	Yeah absolutely and, a new friend can be just as important as a new romantic relationship in a person's life.
Kristina	Yeah! Where do your books take place?
Merlina	They all take place in Leicester, in the UK. Well the 3 <sup>rd</sup> one they end up going to the see for like, $\frac{3}{4}$ of it but they still start and end in the same town.
Kristina	So by the time this comes out for the world the trilogy will have been completed, and out to the world... what is next for you when it comes to books and characters? Are you gonna keep self publishing indie books?
Merlina	<p>Yeah so, there's a lot of ongoing projects... too many. But I have an already finished book that I wanna try to find an agent for. But that's... just the idea of starting to look is really overwhelming so I've not really done much on that front.</p> <p>And then when this comes out I'll have finished NaNoWriMo so this book I'm probably going to publish in the summer of 2024. That's about Bill who is a doctor in his 50s and it's set in the 1970s in the US. And he meets his ex lover again but things ended really badly 20 years ago and it's about them reconnecting, trying to find a happy relationship again and falling in love again. I love second chances romance, but they always end up being such long books because they have to work through all of their mistakes and past and that's like... I'm already at 60k words and they haven't even kissed!</p>
Kristina	Yeah there's a lot of set up with that trope absolutely! That's so funny. I haven't done second chances yet but I have a game plan so I will but you're right they have to work through all their stuff before they can even try and fall in love again or see if they can.
Merlina	Yeah! But it's a trope that's very dear to me because me and my husband we sort of... got together but not really and then didn't speak for a bit and then got together again... it spread out for so long but it worked and we're really happy now so... I

	<p>really love those stories because it doesn't have to always work right on the first try. You can also know that it's the right person but not the right moment.</p>
Kristina	<p>Yeah or you're not the right version of yourself yet, you have to go through some stuff before you're both ready for that. I love that you're living proof of second chance! (Laughs). That's so fun.</p> <p>Now do you think you're going to do in the future kind of like you did with trilogy, where you'll have a few stand alone books that do intertwine and that you'll explore that same group of characters?</p>
Merlina	<p>I'd like to do that yeah! For now I have also a half written project that's a lot more complicated because... not contemporary so there's a lot of world building and it's going to be a sort of steampunk adventure. The main story is already going to be 2 or 3 books and I've already got an idea for the same world, either like a century earlier or later, I'm not sure yet!</p> <p>So it will be sort of similar world but different characters thing again. But it's a lot of work, this one!</p>
Kristina	<p>World building! I've spoken with a few fantasy authors who have to sit to create worlds and I don't... I've created one fictional town that's based on a real town just a few states away and that's hard enough. I can't imagine building an entire world! Even not necessarily an entire world but its own little universe from scratch, that's a ton of work before you're even writing the story, to figure out.</p>
Merlina	<p>I was too excited to start writing and as I get going, I was like... Oh I haven't thought about that, or that like... What kind of currency do they use? What's the history of the place... (laughs) there's so much to figure out!</p>
Kristina	<p>Yeah like these little details that matter but you don't think about it when you're just gearing up to write! I don't know that I'm cut out for something like that (laughs). Just to keep track of all those details alone is a job.</p>
Merlina	<p>Yeah! For the first book, the investigation part alone is a nightmare to keep track of because you have to have separate timelines: the timeline that the reader has and the timeline of</p>



	<p>how things actually happened and the timeline of how the police or the person leading the investigation discovers things.</p> <p>So I have a whole Excel sheet!</p>
Kristina	<p>Yeah I was gonna say (laughs) what does your spreadsheet look like? Yeah and I'm sure... actually, the great question, are readers figuring out who did it as the characters are, or do we know as readers when we're reading it...</p>
Merlina	<p>So for this one the reader finds out at the same time as the characters do.</p>
Kristina	<p>Love that!</p>
Merlina	<p>Because I write everything from the perspective of the main character.</p>
Kristina	<p>So we can live it with you guys!</p>
Merlina	<p>You can probably try and find clues as well but there's the main revelation comes at the end.</p>
Kristina	<p>I'm so excited that you have so many fun projects in the pipeline! I'm excited to see all that's next for you! So I always kind of end every conversation with this question which is: what's the biggest piece of advice you would give somebody who is considering self publishing? Because it's a hard thing to try and figure out.</p>
Merlina	<p>So I haven't been doing this for that long cause I started early 2023 and I, you know, I read a few books and articles about the practical aspects of things.</p> <p>But what's helped me the most is connecting with other indie authors. Finding the community, the right one for you, within your genre... Even just other indie authors who may be a bit more experienced, they'll be able to tell you what's the right software to use, how does Amazon KDP work... Because there's a lot that you can't find in a book and it's just real life experience.</p>
Kristina	<p>Yeah, finding that community, because you don't know what you don't know. Like you said there is so much that an article... cause I was the same way, you research, you obviously try to figure out how to do this but there's so much left unsaid within that research. And the only way that you get the truth is doing it and talking to other people who also did it. There is such a great indie community though! And I was afraid of that in the</p>

	<p>beginning I was like, ‘nobody is gonna want to help me if I have a question’ at least for me when I started I’m just conditioned this way. To a point it’s like... We’re all competition, we’re all authors, we’re all trying to grab readers, why is anybody going to help me... And then at some point I was like ‘oh no that’s not how things work here, in this world everybody is just so supportive of each other.’ There’s readers for everybody.</p> <p>Something about the indie community is so... special.</p> <p>I feel like I’ve found my people there too.</p> <p>You know, finding your indie community and those people who are there to help you has, for me, it’s made this huge difference. You can vent, you can share ideas and collaborate and you can do fun things together too which is great!</p> <p>You’re spot on, it’s find your people and your support system. Cause I think it’s hard – not that my friends and family aren’t supportive – there’s always so much that you can sit and vent to them that can be helpful too. So it’s nice having a support system who’s also in the industry and can actually help.</p>
Merlina	Yeah cause it also gets a bit lonely, writing, itself. So even just having little events where you can write together... I don’t know if you have Discord but sprint bots are really good for that.
Kristina	I have it and I’m interested in doing that. I know a bunch of people do writing sprints together and I just haven’t... That scares me, I’m not sure why! (laughs)
Merlina	That’s fair!
Kristina	I’m excited for you, I’m excited for all the things that are coming for you, I’m excited that you’re gonna query also... Cause that’s its own different beast than self publishing (laughs)
Merlina	Looks like it yeah...
Kristina	But I think it’s such a great experience. I haven’t queried but down the line, I think with a stand alone I’d be interested in trying. There’s a lot of indie authors who have done both successfully. I’m so excited for you, I’m excited for literally everything! I’m excited to get your book, it hasn’t arrived yet but I did order it. So I’m excited to read it.
Merlina	Oh, thank you!
Kristina	I had Rachel on the podcast in the summer and she’s like

	obsessed with you, she's so wonderful.
Merlina	She's so nice and she's actually been the biggest help in getting people to read my book! (laughs)
Kristina	She is! She is amazing, I love her she's so so nice. Cause I see your posts too and she was like "she's my current favourite author" and I was like 'oh I'm really excited that I'm gonna have her on'. And somebody else too, I can't remember who when they saw that I was gonna chat with you said the same thing like 'I'm so excited'. (laughs) So you have a lot of fans!
Merlina	Aw that's really nice to hear!
Kristina	So I'm excited to get your book in my hands and to dive right in.
Merlina	Excited to hear what you think!
Kristina	Yay! Thank you so much for this chaotic interview!
Merlina	Thank you for having me!