

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Rebecca, But With Cats

Kara LaReau on Licorice, a haunted house on Manderley Lane, the layoff that finally got her writing, and why big feelings belong in a spooky story for kids.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Every house has a smell. At Five Manderley Lane, it is licorice. It is in every chair leg, every carpet fiber, every throw pillow, even inside the bathtub, and it is strongest upstairs in Max's room, almost overpowering. For a small, frightened kitten who has only just found a home, that scent is not a welcome. It is a question: who was here before me, and are they really gone?

That is the setup of *Licorice*, the new book from award-winning author Kara LaReau. Kitty lands at the Mount Charles Animal Shelter after a storm sweeps away her forest home and family. The shelter has warmth, food, and Bunny Van Hopper, her overbearing and terrifying cage neighbor. Then Max appears, a boy with a reputation for adopting shelter pets and giving them a life of kindness and treats, and out of all the animals there, he chooses Kitty. As she is carried off, Bunny Van Hopper calls after her: "You're going to regret this! I just know it!" At her new home, Duchess, the family's old parrot, won't let Kitty forget that she is a replacement.

It is billed as a fantastically kid-friendly, light psychological horror about fitting in, standing out, overcoming fear, and finding a place called home. LaReau knows that territory from both sides of the desk. Before she was the author of the award-winning chapter book series *The Infamous Ratsos*, the middle-grade trilogies *The Unintentional Adventures of the Bland Sisters* and the *ZomBert Chronicles*, the chapter book series *WITCHYCAKES*, and many picture books, she was an editor at Candlewick Press and Scholastic Press. There she edited Kate DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie* (a Newbery Honor book), *The Tiger Rising* (a National Book Award finalist), *The Tale of Despereaux* (Newbery Medal), *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (Boston Globe Horn Book Award), and the Mercy Watson series.

Paul Salfen reached LaReau for AMFM Magazine as fall weather rolled into Texas, with Halloween close. He held his copy up to the camera, and she lit up.

"Oh my gosh, I am over the moon," she said. "I mean, Scholastic pulled out all the stops. All the little bells and whistles, from the sprayed edges, that incredible moment between the two cats, and the spot lamination on the cover to make the cat's eyes shine. I mean, it's just, like, beyond what I could have imagined."

SHOCKED AND DELIGHTED

Salfen pointed out that someone who has edited and written so many books knows a good one when she sees it, and that this has to feel like the place she always hoped to reach. She didn't play it cool.

“Every day is just, like, I’m so thankful and thrilled and just shocked and delighted,” she said. “You know, it’s just so many, all the feelings.”

Kids have their heads in their phones, Salfen said, and it isn’t always the best content. A book like this pushes back. LaReau started with what the book is at its core.

“My story is, you know, there are a lot of levels to it, but at its heart, it’s a classic middle grade story. That means, you know, it’s for ages 8 to 12,” she said. “It’s an animal story. It’s about very universal feelings. It’s about fear, it’s about belonging, it’s about insecurity, it’s about love, you know, that are resonant for any age. But I think it’s really important for kids to find something similar to what they’re feeling. And stories, just in general, are such a great way to connect. You know, connect with your own feelings, and also connect with other people who might be reading the same story, or a grown-up who might be sharing the story with you.”

HAUNTED ON MANDERLEY LANE

Asked for an overview, she gave the pitch the way an editor would, clean and in layers.

“*Licorice* is about a feral cat named Kitty, and she is adopted by a boy named Max,” she said. “And shortly after Max brings Kitty to his house on 5 Manderley Lane, Kitty realizes that she’s being haunted. She’s being haunted by her tragic past, she’s being haunted by her fears and insecurities, and quite possibly, she might be haunted by the cat that lived in the house before her.”

The ghost may or may not be real. The fear is. And LaReau is careful about the label.

“It’s creepy and spooky,” she said. “I wouldn’t necessarily say it’s scary, it’s not horror, but it’s definitely got, like, some psychological fear in there, for sure.”

The season suits her. “I love Halloween,” LaReau said. “I mean, I love the fall, I’m definitely a fall person, and I love, sort of, the changing seasons. I love, like, this whole arc, Halloween through the holidays.”

And yes, she is the right person to write from inside a cat’s head. “I’ve always been a cat person,” she said. “You know, I’ve had a lot of different pets throughout my life, but I’ve always, always had a cat. That’s always been a constant. And now I have two.”

THIS GUY GETS PAID TO TELL STORIES

Salfen called her talent a gift and asked when she first realized she had it. LaReau went back to before she could even read.

“I’d say I’ve always had a passion for stories,” she said. “Even before I could read or write, I loved hearing stories, and I loved telling stories, and then as I got older, I loved reading stories, and then writing my own little stories. And then when I was in second grade, an author came to my school. He was an author-illustrator, and he was wonderful. But what I got out of the visit is that I realized this guy gets paid to tell stories, and I did not realize that was a career option. And once I realized it, that’s all I ever wanted to do.”

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She went to school for it. Then came publishing, and the long run as an editor that shaped everything after.

“I ended up getting a job in publishing and worked as an editor for a really long time, which was a wonderful experience in and of itself, but it was also a great education into the world of children’s books,” she said. “And I just got really inspired by working with such talented authors and illustrators, and it just made me want to try my hand at writing for young readers. It was a long journey, but a pretty straight shot from the beginning.”

CHANNELING MY YOUNGER SELVES

Not everybody can write for kids, Salfen noted. A lot of adults try and miss. So what keeps her in the right place?

“It’s very easy for me to channel my younger selves, whether I’m writing picture books, or chapter books, or middle grade,” LaReau said. “It’s easy for me to go back and get into my past head, and just remember what that was like. Those feelings and those, like, thoughts are still really fresh for me. And it also helps that I have a 13-year-old, and so I’ve seen it happen, you know, to someone else very, very close to me. I just have that way of being able to channel the past, and who I was, and how I felt, and what I was afraid of, and what I wanted, and all of that kind of comes to the surface when I sit down to write.”

READ, WRITE, AND SHARE

For young readers who want to do what she does, LaReau’s advice is the same routine she still keeps.

“These are things that I still do to this day. So, read a lot,” she said. “Like I said, reading other people’s work, especially people who are doing it really well, that’s such a great education into how to tell a story. And then write a lot. I mean, I write all the time, and not everything I write ends up turning into a book. It’s just all practice for me. Even if something doesn’t turn out the way I thought it would, that’s a learning experience for me. As long as I keep writing, I kind of keep that muscle exercised.”

The third step is the one the former editor clearly values most.

“And then I share my work with other people, get fresh eyes on it, and get other people’s perspectives. That always makes my work better,” she said. “Someone with fresh eyes will notice why something isn’t working, or they’ll have an idea I never would have thought of, or they see a connection that I didn’t realize was there, and that’s really magical. So, yeah, I’d say read and write and share. Those would be my three.”

NOTHING TO LOSE

Salfen co-hosts a show with Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboys great who caught the Hail Mary and went into the Hall of Fame, and he asked LaReau the question that show is built on: the moment in her life or career when she had to just throw it and go for it. She didn’t have to look far. It was this book.

“I came up with the idea for it long before I started to write it,” she said. “I have had this issue sometimes where I can come up with a really great idea, and then convince myself that I’m not good enough to write the story that lives up to that idea. And so it would have been really easy for me to psych myself out of writing this, which is, you know, I’m basically retelling Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, which is a classic in Gothic literature. But with cats? You know, like, what? On the other hand, it’s like, who do you think you are that you think you could pull that off?”

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Readers who know du Maurier will already have caught the address. Manderley is not a random street name.

“That’s the way I felt for a really long time, like, oh, that’s crazy, I can’t do that,” LaReau said. “And then one day, maybe a year or so later, I got laid off from my job. And I was really bummed out, and I was like, you know what? I need to do something productive to take my mind off of this, and to feel like I’m moving forward. I’m just gonna write that idea that I had and see what happens. I mean, I have nothing to lose. I really had nothing to lose at that point.”

That was the throw. “I had nobody to impress. I just felt like, if I fail, I fail, no one’s gonna know,” she said. “And it ended up being, like, so much fun. So much fun to write. And the more I wrote, the more confident I felt. So, yeah, that worked out.”

It did.

JOURNAL MY WAY OUT

Part of it is mindset, Salfen said. What does she tell herself when the words just aren’t coming? LaReau has an actual system, and it lives in a notebook.

“One of the things I do when I’m writing is I actually keep a writing journal,” she said. “Every day that I write, once I’m finished working on the manuscript, I write in the journal about how I’m feeling, mentally and emotionally, about what I’ve just written. Sometimes it’s going really well, and sometimes, like, I am really stuck. Or this was a day where it’s not good. And then I kind of examine that in my journal, like, oh, why do I feel that way? And I’ll just keep journaling, and nine times out of ten, I will sort of journal my way out of the problem and figure it out.”

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The journal also turned out to be a map. LaReau is working on something new now, and the old pages are telling her she has been here before.

“Some days are great, and some days are not, and I can look back to my journal that I wrote when I was writing *Licorice*, and I can see that I was having all the same feelings, almost at exactly the same points in the journey,” she said. “And so I really learned, like, this is just part of it. This is part of the process. You just go

through these ups and downs. The first draft, you're always gonna think it's terrible. And that just makes me feel like, oh, I am on the right track. I just need to keep going. Just keep going."

WHAT IS HOME FOR ME?

Last, Salfen asked what she hopes kids take away beyond a good time.

"On the surface, it's a great, fun story. It's a mystery, it's a little bit spooky, it's great for this time of year, but it's great any time of year," she said. "But it's also, like I said, a classic animal story, and it's about kind of big feelings. It's about things that we can all relate to. Feeling like you need to live up to a certain standard that you just don't think you're able to. It's about, where do I belong? I feel like I don't belong here or there, like, what is home for me? Do I have the courage to do what needs to be done? Finding that courage, whether it's to take a really brave leap, or to open yourself up to connecting with another person. These are all things that are relatable for kids, and also for anyone of any age. I hope that all of that comes through."

Salfen said it certainly will, told everyone to pick up the book, and said he was glad to hear a new one is on the way. Then he signed off the only way that fit the season. "Happy Halloween!"

"Thanks, you too," LaReau said.

A kitten that doesn't feel good enough. A house that smells like the cat who came before. An author who almost talked herself out of the idea, until a layoff left her nothing to lose. *Licorice* is a ghost story about measuring up, and Kara LaReau wrote it by deciding, finally, that she did.

FIND LICORICE

Title: *Licorice*

Author: Kara LaReau

Illustrated by: Kelly Murphy

Publisher: Scholastic Press

Release date: October 20, 2026 (hardcover)

Audience: Middle grade, ages 8 to 12

Story: A frightened kitten adopted from the Mount Charles Animal Shelter finds her new home at Five Manderley Lane haunted by the scent of licorice, and perhaps by the cat who lived there before.

Kara LaReau lives in Providence with her husband and daughter and their cats.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, October 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.
