

# THE **Neuro**Diversity **PODCAST**

*with Emily Kircher-Morris*

## Books for “Kids on the fringes”

### EPISODE #145

#### **Jamie Sumner 0:00**

They look around the four walls of their classroom and their house and their neighborhood, and if they don't fit in, they think "this is it for me", and I wish that someone had said to me, the world is so much bigger and full of so many different kinds of people.

#### **Emily Kircher-Morris 0:21**

When kids read stories about kids like themselves, they experience a feeling of universality, a feeling that they aren't alone. Our guest today is dedicated to telling stories about kids on the fringes, stories about kids who live in a world that wasn't created for them. She writes middle grade novels that include "The Summer of June" and "Tune it Out." Jamie Sumner pulls from her experiences as a teacher, and a parent of a child with special needs to create characters that all kids can connect with. That's straight ahead on episode 145, I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, and this is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

#### **Intro 1:03**

What is neurodiversity? This is the Neurodiversity Podcast.

#### **Emily Kircher-Morris 1:23**

So recently, I've been traveling quite a bit and having a blast meeting and talking with folks at various conferences and trainings that I've been doing. This month, the Neurodiversity Podcast will have a booth at both the National Association for Gifted Children conference in Indianapolis, and the Texas Association for Gifted and Talented conference in Houston. I'll also be presenting at both of those conferences, and at the booth, we're going to have some swag available, so be sure to stop by and check things out. Also, no worries if you can't attend, we'll be launching our swag store on our

website soon, so stay tuned. We've got t-shirts, tote bags, coffee cups, and more on the way. Okay, up next is my conversation with author Jamie Sumner. Stay with us.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 2:57**

Today, we are talking with Jamie Sumner. Jamie writes in the middle grade novels that feature kids on the fringes, including "Roll With It" and "The Summer of June." So Jamie, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Jamie Sumner 3:10**

Thank you for having me.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 3:12**

So I love that phrase "kids on the fringes." So can you tell us a little bit about what that means to you? And why you decided to write books featuring these kids?

**Jamie Sumner 3:23**

Well, I'll first start by saying I think that all kids at some point feel like they're on the fringe, especially in that middle school age group, which is what I write for, upper elementary and middle school, because we all have that memory of feeling like everyone else has given been given some sort of secret password key to like understanding what's happening around us and in the world, and we somehow miss the memo. And so I think everyone has that feeling and can relate to that feeling. But in particular, with my debut novel "Roll With It", Ellie is the protagonist, and she has cerebral palsy and she's in a wheelchair, and she is awesome, like she's tough, and it takes a lot for her to let her guard down and part of that story is her learning to do that and let people in. But I wanted to write that in particular for my son Charlie who has CP and is in a wheelchair, and when he started school and we went into his little school library they didn't have any books with kids like him on the cover or even really believable side characters, like not just forget about being the protagonist even believable fleshed out fully developed side characters there weren't any. And if you go through your whole life, not seeing anyone like you in stories or movies or commercials or anything else, then you're gonna think either I'm the only one or nobody cares about me, my existence and how I live isn't important enough for other people to pay attention to. And I didn't want to do that, I didn't want him to feel that way, and it's not like I can change the world with one book, but I could start, I mean, I can put a story out there. And luckily, I think there are a lot more now than there were when I first started writing, but I do think that the idea of the kids on the fringes, I just want as a former teacher, I just want everybody to feel seen in the classroom and outside of the classroom, and that's where my heart goes, anytime I go to put words on a page, because that's what I would have wanted. And I think that it's important and necessary, and I don't just want to

write stories that entertain, I want to write stories that touch people and reach people that may not have been reached before.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 5:54**

Yeah, you mentioned that you were a teacher, and obviously, you're also a parent, and you talk a little bit about how those things could have influenced you. But I'm curious about how they specifically influence how you write your characters, and also how it influences your conceptualization of your readers, because I feel like for authors, like you're always kind of thinking about who that audience is, and how they're going to be receiving what you're writing. So how does that time both in the classroom and also as a parent, influence how you go through that writing process?

**Jamie Sumner 6:24**

Oh, my goodness, I don't even know that I would have any stories to tell without those things without having been a teacher and now a parent. When I go into schools and talk to students in the classrooms, I always talk about how they're in fourth grade and, and they're sitting there and I'm like, How many people know what they want to do when they grow up? And I mean, a lot of them raise their hand because they all have things they want to do, but I always look for this kids that don't, and I think, I always say to them, you do not have to know what you want to do now. I was sitting in my college graduation thinking, oh, wait, I can't just keep taking English classes forever, what? What do I do now? Oh, okay, and I moved myself to New York, and I got a job in publishing, and I hated it. I hated it so much, because I thought that's what I was supposed to do, but that's not where my heart was, and it turns out my heart was in teaching. And you know what else it turns out my heart was in writing books, but it was a winding journey, and it's not like you just lock into something and you're done, because we change as people for all our years, not just those beginning years, we continue to change. And I think teaching and then becoming a parent gave me the various perspectives that, and life experience that I needed to be able to write books. So many great scenes in the classroom have come from real scenes in real life that that I've experienced with my students, I taught high school. But I taught in every scenario imaginable, I taught in public, low income, private, very posh, if anyone has read "Tune it Out", which was my second novel actually set that book in a very posh high school for the fun of it, because it was fun to write that situation. I've done tutorials for kids that are doing homeschool, I've done private tutoring, and so all of that helps me one get to know get to like, burrow in to the minds and the perspective of kids that age, but it was such a good reminder to me of what it was like back then because you forget things. You forget what was so important to me then versus now and how you don't have a lot of like long term rationale at that age, and the things that are important, the things that are touchstones, your family is your world in a way that it only is when you're

dependent on the people you live with, to provide you for everything. And that's something that I think a lot of people forget in storytelling, that when you're a kid, you don't have a lot of autonomy, so when you get a little bit, you just latch on to it because it's awesome, because that's what you want. And same with parenting, I had a rough journey to becoming a mom of Charlie, and then also I have now twins, so there's a lot going on in my house. But I think parenting is really what gave me the why I write, like, it's what gave me the desire to not just write, to entertain, but to write to hopefully change the world my kids are going into because I saw them getting bigger and the way the world was and I wanted to help as a mom, and also in any way I can as a creative and that's kind of where it all came together. And that's when I started writing books, I didn't do that before I, that was not my, I mean I've always written I've always written, but that was not something that I thought would ever be a legitimate career for me which is amazing to get to do because then I still get to be a teacher because I still get to go into the classrooms and talk to the kids so it comes full circle.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 9:59**

Working with kids definitely helps understand and give that voice, and so and you can kind of hang on to that. You mentioned a little bit about the character Ellie, who was in your book "Roll With It." I'm curious, who are some of your favorite characters that you've written main characters or side characters? And what is it about those characters that you really feel a connection with?

**Jamie Sumner 10:22**

This is so tough, it's like pick your favorite child. Okay, so the sequel to "Roll With It" is coming out this spring, "Time to Roll" is the new one, and so I've been back in that world finishing up the final copy edits and everything, and so some of my favorite characters Coralie is Ellie's best friend, Coralie and Bert both, but Coralie is sassy and loud and brave in ways that make Ellie brave, and she's so funny, like, some of my funniest lines have been Coralie's. And Bert, to me is the I think he has the most heart of any character in all of my stories, and I don't even know like if you'd asked me how and where that came from, I don't know, it's like Bert just came out fully flushed, and I love him and want to take care of him forever. Another character that I love, so in "Tune it Out", the main character, Louise, she goes by Lou, her best friend is, Well, his name is Well, well his name is Maxwell, but he goes about Well, because he's reinventing himself. And he's a theater kid, and he is, he was so fun to write because he's vulnerable but he's also just so over the top, and I was a theater kid, and that's where I found my place. And so it was really fun to write him as someone that, oh, if I could have had him as my best friend, because I had a composite of him among different people, but if that had been combined into a superpower that was Well, it would have been amazing.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 12:01**

I noticed that you didn't really mention any of your main characters, but I think that that is a lot of times for the some of that fun, you can kind of play around a little bit with some of those side characters and develop that. You mentioned that Ellie in "Roll With It" has a diagnosis of, did you say this or am I just knowing this? CP, right?

**Jamie Sumner 12:18**

Yes, I did say that.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 12:19**

I know that June in "The Summer of June", deals with anxiety and sensory processing, how have you decided how to integrate some of those characteristics into your main characters, and how that kind of helps to advance the story and also normalize those kids on the fringes?

**Jamie Sumner 12:35**

You know, it's funny, June has both anxiety and, I don't know that I would call it an actual diagnosis of a sensory processing disorder, it's more how her anxiety plays out. Now Lou, in in "Tune it Out" fully gets diagnosed with SPD in the book, like she gets diagnosed, you actually see her take a test with the criteria in the counselor's office that list that because that was very important to me. And again, with the SPD that came about, we're coming full circle, to my experience as a mom of Charlie, who also has SPD, like, I can't vacuum in my home, because that's a noise that will always be a trigger for him. I take him to a sensory friendly haircut place because he can't handle the blow dryers and the razors and things like that. But also as a teacher, I had students that that had SPD, but because of when I taught, and that wasn't a well known diagnosis, they didn't get diagnosed, and it was heartbreaking. June, you asked about favorite characters, June I think was the hardest, but most cathartic character to write because I was a really anxious kid, really anxious, and my family didn't really know what to do with that, you know, they just said you're being too sensitive, or don't get so worked up, or just relax my brother, chillax just chillax. And I then thought, well, something is really wrong with me, if they're not, their mind isn't worrying like w-h-i-r-r-i-n-g, at full speed at all times, because mine was and I think that writing "The Summer of June" and portraying anxiety in a way that shows the positives because hi, now I write books because my mind is worrying 100% all the time, and so the characters come to life and they, I'm able to do that because of the way I was made. I really wanted to show how to cope but also the parts that you can celebrate about yourself and the way that you were made unique because I think in the disability community, within the community, the disabled and the people close to them know how

to celebrate them, and they know what that means. But from the rest of the world, it's a lot of pity, it's a lot I have sympathy and empathy instead of celebration, and I don't want that, like I don't want characters or you're gonna feel sorry for or think, oh, well, they piece together a pretty good life, no, it's, it's just as good as any other life, it's just different from yours different is good. And with these characters being on the fringes, because there are less of them like this in the world somehow that equates to less valuable or less mainstream, but that doesn't mean a lesser life.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 15:36**

You know, talking about kind of normalizing this and and showing different ways that lots of different things can show up for all the different people. One of the ways that June's anxiety manifests is that she pulls her hair. For me as a mental health counselor, it's great to see that because I think that's one of those things that people don't talk about or understand that. So sometimes I have families coming in, and they're, they don't realize what is going on with that.

**Jamie Sumner 16:00**

That actually was came from a very specific experience of a student that I taught, that came into school one day with a wig, and everyone commented, everyone's like, why are you wearing that? That's so weird, because it was, you know, kids freshman year of high school and this girl, I mean, do you can't explain that to people, and she shouldn't have to explain that to her peers. But there was not dialogue for it, and there was not really communication among teachers either of what she was going through and how to treat her respectfully. And that's why I put that in there is because if you've never seen it or thought about it, your initial reaction is wait, what? And nobody wants to be reacted to in that way.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 16:48**

Yeah, and I think for kids, too, they see so many differences in their peers, and I think as adults, sometimes we shy away from talking about them for some reason. Do you notice that too?

**Jamie Sumner 16:59**

I really do, because my favorite thing about author visits to schools is the q&a, because kids will ask anything, and you see the teachers get embarrassed, like, I'm going to be upset because this kid asked this question in this way, and I'm always like, thank you, thank you for asking that way to bring it up, let's talk about it. And I think I think it's a conditioning thing, it's like as we get older, and we look around us and try to figure out what's appropriate, what's not, I mean, how many times has a teacher said in class, that's not appropriate. It's like, we look around and try to figure out, okay, what are the

social cues, and it's the kids that don't learn those that often get ostracized, because they don't know, and so we desperately tried to fit in and look, again, look like we know what's going on. And so because of that, adults are much less willing to say what they think unfiltered, and ask the hard questions, that's the worst fallout is they don't ask the hard questions, because they're afraid of looking dumb, stepping on toes, whatever, whatever it could be. I think it's much worse actually now with social media and everything, because there's the extreme people who say everything they want to say, unfiltered, and are trying to be offensive. And then there's the people who could maybe have a really amazing strong voice, but are too afraid to speak out because they don't want to get tackled. And I think we've got to find some sort of happy medium where people feel safe enough to express what they think.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 18:39**

Right? All of that the social media stuff, but also just that awareness and people's fear about asking questions, it all just exacerbates the problem of making topics taboo and stigmatizing different diagnoses, so people feel like they can't talk about them. One of the missions of this podcast is to really work on normalizing neurodiversity, and disabilities in general, and in helping people understand that those of us who operate in the world differently, that's okay, but we have to be able to talk about it.

**Jamie Sumner 19:09**

We have to create those safe spaces.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 19:11**

I think the books are a great way to open that conversation with students. It gives permission, it brings up the topic.

**Jamie Sumner 19:19**

Well, and it's easier to talk about something, when it's not about you. It's it, the books give a little bit of distance so you can talk about this topic, really get into it. And it's not like you are exposing yourself in ways that would make you feel too vulnerable to your classmates. It's a way to have a conversation third person instead of first person.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 19:43**

Yeah actually, that's an intervention that I use in my counseling practice all the time, it's much easier to talk in hypotheticals or do role plays, and it allows kids to process through those emotions, but in a way that doesn't feel scary. It doesn't require them to be quite as vulnerable, but then they can generalize that and and, you know, reflect on that in their own life. You know, as I'm sitting here thinking about this and thinking about how, like "The Summer of June", for example, would be a great book that clinicians

could use for bibliotherapy, to talk to kids about anxiety and talk to, you know, how do you handle these things? How do you how do you find that strength inside yourself?

**Jamie Sumner 20:21**

I loved writing the therapist in that book, she was similar to a therapist that I had when I was in college. And it was so wonderful to get to write the scenes when June was in therapy, or even just thinking about her therapist and talking about the ways to help process things, and then thinking ahead to kids, having conversations about being in therapy is a kid, which you don't see that in books, being in therapy as a kid taking medication as a kid, like you don't see that. And so that if you are doing either one of those things, it feels like oh, I guess I can't talk about this.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 20:57**

Since I was young, and you were young, I think the awareness of varying types of neurodiversity, and disability has changed a lot, and the dialogue surrounding those topics has really shifted. So just in your life, where have you seen that trajectory? How have things changed?

**Jamie Sumner 21:13**

When I was young, nobody talked about any of that, and I think because of that, it felt like either it didn't exist, or it existed, but that's not a thing. We talk about anything about the, I mean, the shows back then that had anyone with any kind of disability, they were atrocious. Now I will say what I've seen as far as the trajectory, there's been, luckily, an influx of books with disabled characters, and films and TV shows and things like that, and you know, target inclusive clothing lines and campaigns like that, that have come about which are wonderful. I think the next step, and my favorite step that I've started to see, is great, you're making these shows you're doing this stuff. Now let's put people in a position of power that are actually disabled, like the writers on these shows the main character that's supposed to have CP, let's have them actually have CP, and I'm seeing more and more the activism there to where it's like nothing. And now stories about this community, and now this community finally gets to create the stories, and that, to me, is where you really see change and empowerment.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 22:31**

Working with with kids is such a powerful profession in whatever way people do it, and also, you know, even just as parents, when you decided to write middle grade novels, like to me, I feel like that's such a good age to introduce some of these concepts. Was that something that kind of influenced, like, how did that process go? And why? Why middle grade novels?



**Jamie Sumner 22:52**

It's funny to even ask that, because I did not know that there was a category called middle grade, when I started writing, I did not know that, I had no idea. Because when I was a kid, it was children's books and adults books, and then later on when I was teaching, they had actual YA young adult books, but middle grade, what, what is middle grade, and I started writing. And the reason Ellie is the age she is 12, is because I wanted all of this to happen at the cusp of sixth grade, the middle of her sixth grade year, she has to start at a new middle school, and that's why that book became middle grade, because it's, I really think it's that age where you change the most. That's the first time you really start thinking, do I believe what my parents believe? Do I want to get into this sport or this hobby or not? And then you kind of think this isn't true, but then then you get into high school, and there's a mentality of these are the things I like, and I'm really going to get into them, and these are going to be the things I do that define me. But middle school is so great, because you want to kind of do everything, and so as far as your mind goes, you're so open minded to different styles of thinking and also like, like different books, like my kids are. The twins are so young, they're in third grade, but I see it now already, like their willingness to read a graphic novel versus a chapter book versus sci fi versus nonfiction like, they just want to try out different things. And so then after writing "Roll With It", I just fell in love with that age group getting to visit them and getting to see them and tell stories in their world because I think they're the most open and receptive to new ideas. And they're hilarious, they're just funny.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 24:46**

They are, back before I was a clinician, I was an educator in middle school was always my favorite age group to teach, but when you tell people that they look at you like there's something wrong with you like why?

**Jamie Sumner 24:56**

It's because they're remembering their middle school, when I think about my own middle school experience like, that was horrible. But like, I wouldn't want to actually go back to middle school, but the kids that I see in middle school now I just, I love them, I love them.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 25:11**

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I know our time is getting short, so I've just one last question for you as we wrap up. So if you were talking to a child, whether it's a reader of your books, or a student in your class, or one of your own children, and they're dealing with learning about their own differences and struggling with finding their identity and their path, what would you say to them? What would you want them to hear?

**Jamie Sumner 25:35**

I would say, the world is so much bigger than it feels right now. Because I think that they look around the four walls of their classroom and their house and their neighborhood, and if they don't fit in, they think this is it for me, there is no way for me. And I wish that someone had said to me, the world is so much bigger and full of so many different kinds of people, and lifestyles and perspectives that make it so much richer. It's like the moment Dorothy goes from Kansas to OZ and everything flips into technicolor, it's like once you see the possibilities of what all is out there, you will find your people, you will find your place, you don't have to know it now, you don't have to walk through these next few years with fear that you won't figure this out, because you don't, there isn't a timeline, a timer following you around. And you need to remember that you are safe, and that you are following the path that you are meant to be on, and you just need to remember, this is not everything. What you see around you is not everything, you can only take the next step.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 27:00**

Yeah, I love that message. It's really powerful, and I think that all kids could look it's good to hear that. But Jamie, thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

**Jamie Sumner 27:11**

Thank you so much. This was this was a lovely conversation to have to get to just, even just for me reset my brain and my heart. It's, it's, it was lovely.

**Emily Kircher-Morris 27:28**

My next career, haha, will be as an author. I remember as a child, one of my hyper fixations was reading. As a matter of fact, my parents used to try to ground me from reading so I would complete my homework joke was on them because it didn't work, and if I couldn't read, I just work on writing my own stories. There's something about the connection that we have with books, and there's something really special about reading a book about a character that allows you to recognize some of yourself. Percy Jackson, who's an ADHDer and dyslexic was one of the first characters that I can remember, although I'm sure there were others before him, who started to look at those differences as a strength, as something that made them who they are, even though they also created hurdles in their life. Biblio therapy is a way for people to understand and accept themselves through reading, and Jamie Sumner and other authors like her are giving characters a voice that all kids will benefit from reading. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on the Neurodiversity Podcast.

**Dave Morris 29:03**

Big thanks to Jamie Sumner, her books are pretty amazing, and you can find your way to her website and books on our episode 145 page at [neurodiversity.podcast.com](http://neurodiversity.podcast.com). Also, swag is coming, we've had a lot of people reach out to us about coffee mugs and shirts and so they're on the way just in time for the holidays, watch our website for info. Our host is Emily Kircher-Morris. Our production assistant and office manager is Krista Brown. The executive producer and studio engineer is me Dave Morris, for all of us, thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time. This is a service of the Neurodiversity Alliance