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>> Hello. I'm Cheryl Kennedy from the Library of Congress. Last year more than 100,000 book lovers of all ages visited the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the National Book Festival, which is sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Now in its 7th year, this free event will take place on the National Mall Saturday, September 29th. Festival goers will interact with the nation's best-selling authors, illustrators, and poets. There will be activities for the entire family. If you are unable to attend in person, we invite you to experience the festival online. Our podcast interview series with well-known authors along with webcasts from the festival will be available through the National Book Festival website at loc.gov/bookfest. We now have the honor of talking with award-winning journalist and investigative reporter Maria Celeste Arraras, who is currently the host and managing editor of Telemundo NBC's "Al Rojo Vivo." Her first book, "Selena's Secret" became a best seller. Her latest book, "The Magic Cane" is written for young readers and is available in both English and Spanish. Thank you so much for being with us today. I'd like to know what inspired you to go from investigative journalism to writing children's literature.

>> Well, precisely that. I wanted to go to something completely different. I had written before "Selena's Secret," which was an investigative report on the murder of Selena Quintanilla-Perez, Tejano [inaudible] queen, and it was a very difficult book to write because her murder was so horrible and in the process of writing a book that is investigative is very, very tedious. You have to spend endless months reading different kinds of court documents and investigating and reading police reports and the story itself was so, so sad that I really wanted to go to something that was the complete opposite, something that was happy, that was fantasy, that was kind of under my control when I had to write it and that I could edit or change at my own whim and it really, when the idea came to write a children's book, it was like the perfect option to what I wanted to write.

>> What's your underlying message in the book, "The Magic Cane?"

>> Well, there's several ones. I definitely wanted a book that was a magical fable like the kind that I grew up with, with my grandparents when they sat me in their lap and told me a story and they all began like once upon a time and that's what I wanted. I wanted to have the kind of book that was like a generation, like it was a bridge for the generations and all these books have the particular characteristic that they had a lesson or different lessons and in my case, "The Magic Cane" had four different lessons, one of them being that you have to be kind to people that are in a disadvantage, in this case the old lady that had the cane, and obviously the two boys at the beginning of the story and one of them is really evil and mean to the lady and at the end he pays a high price for that and another one that is very kind and loving and considerate with her and at the end of the book, he is rewarded in an incredible way. At the beginning of the story, it comes across like it's really the other way around, that the bad one is blessed and the other one really gets nothing for his act of kindness and then the story shows that, you know,

it wasn't that way at all. The second lesson in the book is that more is not always better. Why, because the boy that was the evil one, Moconoco, becomes the evil emperor later in the story. He ends up having three of each of his senses, and three noses, three mouths, three ears, and basically at the beginning he thinks that's a good thing but then he realizes that by being so greedy, he sold his soul to the devil and he basically became a miserable being. And then there's another one, which to me the most important one, which is that a family that sticks together is invincible. In this case, the three kids that have the superpowers, the three kids of the good boy at the beginning of the story, they learn that only by fighting together can they besiege evil, in this case the evil emperor, Moconoco, so and the reason why I wanted to convey that message is because when I first started, you know, working on the story, I had three small children, ages, now they're 9, 8 and 6, back then they were 2, 3 years younger, and they used to get in a fight every time I started telling a story because each one had something they wanted to hear about and so I have to invent a story for them and start telling them something that they wanted to hear and they were interested in so they would stop fighting and the other story, they realized that only siding together and using the superpowers in conjunction with each other can they besiege the evil emperor. While they try on their own, they were not successful.

>> You mentioned that the three children in your book had magical powers. Of course, you're very talented but if you had to have one magical superpower, what would that be?

>> Well it would not have anything to do with the book. If I had to have one magical power it would be definitely the ability to make sure justice and peace ruled in the world.

>> Well that's certainly, I guess if you had to have one opportunity or one power, that would be a very good thing to wish for. You were born and raised in Puerto Rico, but you attended college in New Orleans and obviously you lived there for a few years. Did Katrina affect you more personally because you lived there for several years?

>> Tremendously, tremendously. As a matter of fact, when I went to college in the University of New Orleans and I loved that city tremendously, and two months before Katrina, I had been there after a long time that I had not visited and when Katrina took place, amazingly enough I was on vacation in Africa and when it hit and the day after that I was in the middle of [inaudible] in a camping ground with no electricity, so I had no idea what happened. And I was Kenya, making a change of life and I saw the television and I am watching the news and I'm hearing the major of New Orleans talking about everything that was going on at the time and I started to cry in the middle of the airport and I was with a colleague of mine who had gone to school with me in [inaudible] at the same time and it was like we were both devastated, so we found out in the middle of a very happy time about a very, very big tragedy.

>> Your illustrations in the book, the illustrations in the book are striking and the depiction of the king with his extra appendages is very

creative. Explain the collaboration process between a writer and the illustrator.

>> Well in this case it was sort of like a magical formula because we never spoke to each other during the entire process until the book was finished, which I called him to congratulate him. First of all, scholastics hired the illustrator and he turned out to be a very talented Argentinean illustrator named Pablo Raimondi who used to work with Marvel Superheroes and at the beginning there was [inaudible] because, you know, these superheroes are very futuristic and very harsh and this was a magical fable with a lot of fantasy and just kind of very romantic kind of world and he really added a tremendous element of the future together with the story, which is a story like a classic story, and I think it was a great combination. At the beginning, you know, we kind of had to tone down the characters but when he came up with the emperor and I saw it in a black and white, even before it had color, I was mesmerized because he really did a fantastic job. I imagined the evil emperor Moconoco in one way but it was kind of abstract. I didn't have a clear vision and I was concerned that if I didn't have it clear, how could the illustrator have it clear and this guy, you know, really killed it on the first draft. He really did a fantastic drawing and he really captured what I wanted to have in that emperor and it went so good along with the name that it was just a magical combination, number one. And number two, interesting enough, obviously the three kids in the story are my three children and he had never seen a picture of my children, yet he drew them in a way that they looked so much like my real children that I was surprised. My daughter has light brown hair and so does the girl in the book. My middle son is blonde with black eyes and so does the character that it's him in the book. And my older son has black hair with like caramel color eyes and so does this boy that has the power of the wind in the book. And I was so surprised that it was just like an incredible coincidence so we had a great match without ever speaking to each other.

>> Well you know that sounds truly magical.

>> It was, it was and so, you know, the whole book has been an incredible source of satisfaction for me because it was a dream that I've had for a long time and I like it because it's a book that number one, it's not for Hispanics, it's not for an English audience, it's for everybody. It's a universal story. It has several universal messages and, like I told you before, it builds a bridge between generations. It's the kind of book that we, the parents used to grow up with and it's a book that has the element of magic and superpowers our kids are used to. And funny enough, when I was trying to come up with a name for the characters, I consulted with my son Julian, who's an avid reader. Just to give you an example, he's in fourth grade and his reading level is at a freshman in high school second semester student and he's always loved reading, so he was a great person to talk to and I said to him, "Hey, what do you think I should call the evil emperor?" And in Spanish, mocco means booger and he was trying to be, I guess he was trying to be, you know, like funny and shocking and he goes, "Oh, let's call him Moconoco. You see the word mocco booger, and he was trying to like shock me, not thing that I was going to, you know, take him seriously but when he said it, it was just like so perfect. I said, "That's it!" And he was like, "Hey, I didn't

mean that seriously" but that's the name and it goes perfect with the evil emperor.

>> Well, how did your children react when they saw themselves reflected in living color in this book?

>> Well they started to try to contribute a little bit too much because they were so excited and they were, you know, they were kind of trying to add, you know, different elements into the story but you [inaudible] and that sounds like an emperor and I say okay, enough, because I have to draw the line somewhere. And of course, their input is in the book but you have to go to print at some point and they were very happy with it. They were very happy that my kids names are Julian [inaudible] and in the book, the characters are [inaudible], which are the nicknames that I call them in Spanish in real life, so they knew perfectly from day one that those three kids were them.

>> Is there a special talent that you need to write for children?

>> Well, you know, I don't know because for me when I accepted to do this project, I had no previous experience writing children's books and when I first started to write the book, I was going through the process of a divorce. So it was very difficult and I had to stop the project because, you know, the last thing in my mind at that time was to be in the world of fantasy of a child, yet the magical thing that happened was that it was the process of the divorce that gave me the idea because then as a single mom when I could come to work after a long day, I was [inaudible] three kids, you know, stretching their little arms for my attention and I would get very frustrated because I would grab one, the other ones would cry, and it was trying to reconcile that that I found the underlying message of the story, which is we have to work together and a family that's united is invincible, let's work together if they're fighting with each other. And so, you know, things happen in a way that they have a reason to be and that's how I see it.

>> Well certainly that's something that single parents can remember to do. What words of wisdom would you share with parents to encourage their children to read?

>> Well, I would say, you know, if you have the problem that I had, make up a story, make up the story that engages them and includes things that they're interested in because no outside writer knows that better than yourself and imagination can really, really put together a family and in this case it did.

>> What did you like to read as a child?

>> Well I'm glad you asked that question because I loved to read since I was little and one of the things that I wanted to accomplish with this book was to include elements that I had and I was fascinated with as a child. I used to read books like "King Midas," which is a magical fable, and it was wonderful because it's the kind of book like I hope "The Magic Cane" will be, which you can read when you are young, a little bit older, and then later and you will still be fascinated because you have lessons

and a deeper meaning that throws light into your present life at whatever level you're in or whatever stage of your life you're in. And that was the case with "King Midas." I also liked "The Little Prince." I liked "The Little Prince" because again it was a story that I read in different periods of my life and then each time it brought a deeper meaning and threw light on something that maybe was going on in my life at the time. And then I also love Greek mythology because when I was little my father was the chancellor of a university in Puerto Rico, so every afternoon all the professors from the university would gather in my house and they would play music and read poetry or literature and there was this particular professor who would always tell me stories about Greek mythology. I used to wait with great expectation the moment in which he would tell me the story of the day, so I grew up with all the, you know, stories from Greek mythology and I loved it and as a matter of a fact, when I saw Moconoco, the evil emperor, he looks like he could be out of Greek mythology because, you know, of course not exactly but he has that little element like Medusa although she had serpents, you know, but in this case, the deformation of the face and what goes on, it's kind of a little bit like that and I love that.

>> How did your childhood shape who you became as an adult?

>> Well, of course, that's so key in all of us. In my case, my parents were very pro-education and reading and they were very, very, very into pursuing, you know, excellence in academics and, you know, my father told me-- One time I got a C and my father sat me down and this is the biggest lesson I've learned in my life and he sat me down very seriously and said, "Never come back into this house with a C. You either come with an A or an F but never a C, never mediocre, you're either the best of the best or the best of the worst but never mediocre" and that's been like a constant in my life, and it was a great lesson. And they were always surrounded, like I told you, with professors, by things that were, you know, to enrich the mind and the soul and I've always [inaudible] as well.

>> Well obviously what your father told you was very profound because you are considered the best of the best. Now we've talked about Maria, the children's author, let's talk about Maria Celeste, the journalist and television celebrity. You've been picked in a celebrity poll in "People en Espanol" as the most popular and credible television personality. You obviously have worked very hard but how do you handle the challenges that come with being a celebrity?

>> Well, you know what, I always think that in this industry, there's a lot of very talented people that end up going nowhere and a lot of people that don't have that much talent that accomplish fantastic things and I think the people that are successful and in my case I can vouch for myself, one of the keys is to have your feet on the ground, never to let your head get too big because when that happens you start making the wrong decisions. You start making decisions based on your ego and the ego is very unstable, as we all know, and you can see a great racecar driver and not be successful because he depends on a team, on the mechanics that take care of the car, et cetera, et cetera, and I've always been a team player and I've always gone from A to Z in my show to make sure that the

show does well and in my career the same way, so I think having a head on your shoulders and not letting your ego rule and always knowing that this is a passing thing, passing thing and you have to always live like tomorrow you can be without everything that you have and when you have all those elements very clear in your mind, you will proceed in a way that you make decisions with principles and with things that are right for your career and not with the immediate ego.

>> "Newsweek" in 2006 elected you as one of top 20 women poised to be the next generation of leaders in their field. What specific advice would you give a) aspiring journalists, and b) aspiring writers?

>> Well, aspiring writer, I will first say, write down everything that comes to your mind because us writers, we have incredible ideas and we always in our minds inventing, writing, and imaging things and very few times do we sit down and actually put them in black and white and when we really decide to do it, then all those great ideas that we had previously have, you know, basically disappeared into thin air. So I think writing them down helps you for when you really have to write and second it gives you the skills and the practice to keep writing, which is how you become a better writer with practice. And as far as the journalist goes, there's a lot of young people studying communication and want to go into this field and there's so very few opportunities that the key is to do what I did. I didn't get to where I wanted right off the bat. I had to start from way at the bottom and that's to advantage. First of all, you learn everything so when you get to the top, nobody can tell you otherwise because you know the business in every way, form, or fashion and you actually contribute to different aspects of the production of whatever you're doing. And second of all, it doesn't matter where you start in this industry in particular, the tradition, the usual thing is to hire from within. So you can start doing an internship in a station and you don't know how many people that are big producers and executives [inaudible] in the networks we have that started as actually interns and that was-- Something funny happened to me. One time I was in Disney World and I was at Universal Studios, sorry, one time I was in Universal Studios and I ran into this kid that wanted to be a caricaturist and he was there basically literally sweeping the floors and he told me, "Well I'm here because I couldn't get a job in what I wanted but I know that here I will run into the people that are in the business" and he actually did. We did a story about him on the show and it was incredible because he put to the test and confirmed what I'm telling you now.

>> Well you obviously could write a book on how to succeed in many areas of life. What's next for you?

>> Well I guess I want to keep writing. That's my passion and whenever I retire, I will write even if it's for myself because writing is something that gives you incredible satisfaction and what's next, well I have a lot of projects in my career but and I always like to keep reinventing myself. I think that is a key element when you are in this kind of business because people get bored very easily. And I like to do it not just for that reason for marketing and strategic purposes but also because doing different things help me find out things about myself, you know, when you have different challenges, like writing a children's book

without knowing how to do it and it comes out well, then you feel incredible satisfaction that you took the chance and you also learn, like one time I was invited to participate in a soap opera as a guest actress and I am not an actress and I said yes and I did it because it's a fantastic opportunity and I could've bombed but I did it and I loved going to that little world and understanding how it works and then, you know, I stepped right back into mine and it was fine but it's also something good for your viewers because they see different facets and they see different, you know, things that you can do. So I think that's very important. I always say that my daughter has been very clever in her career because she's like a chameleon. She always does different things and comes up with different options that makes you keep tuned to her and wanting to find out more about her life.

>> Well like mother like daughter. Can you give us a preview of what fans can expect to hear from you at the festival on September 29th?

>> Well they can expect me to answer all the questions that they may have about the book or about my career, future plans, anything they want to ask. I've always been very open with the people that support my career and, you know, I'm literally an open book. I like to share my life and my projects with my viewers, in this case my readers, because I believe that they give me the opportunity to go into their homes every day and they buy my books and they show interest in my life, I owe it to them. I think that, I kind of as a viewer myself and reader myself and fan of many Hollywood stars myself, I resent when they expect you to buy their books and their music and go to the movies and then when you in turn want to find out more about themselves about them, sorry, they kind of block you and tell you that they don't want to talk about their private life or what goes on in their minds and I think that's a very hypocritical attitude and I'm the opposite of that and I think that has been a positive thing in my career.

>> Why was it important for you to participate in the National Book Festival? Was it to--

>> It's an incredible honor because first of all from the obvious point of view which a fantastic, you know, trampoline for the launching of this book, second of all because there's so many established prestigious authors there that to me, for me to be in their company, it's incredible honor and also because it gives me the opportunity to be with the fan base and the readers of the different genres and to get to know more about them just like they expect to know more about me.

>> What do you think is the most important story you've ever covered?

>> You know there have been so many important stories that I think to point at one would belittle so many others but I can tell you that my experience has been that the most amazing stories and the most amazing interviews are not usually the ones in the headlines or on the cover of magazines or in the, you know, opening the news shows. They usually are the ones that are hidden and the people that give the best interviews are the ones that are not famous because usually famous people are very, are coached of how to answer and they're very guarded and, you know, people

out there are so much sincere and honest and I always appreciate that and you always get a lot more of those interviews than the big [inaudible] you know, that people think are that people are waiting for. I do remember one that had an incredible impact in my career was with the fall of the Soviet Union because at the time I was just starting in my career and I was lucky enough to be there in the middle of [inaudible] covering that incredible transition out of Moscow and I was there for like a whole month and when I came back, you know, that documentary that I did about what was going on got a lot of attention and got a bunch of awards and that really was a big, big push for my career and I got a lot of attention because of that and I started in the right track.

>> Do you have any closing remarks for us today?

>> Well I'm very grateful that there's interest in this book, "The Magic Cane." To me, it's not a project to, you know, to get fame or money or anything. It's a project that I want to really communicate with the readers in a different level from what I do in television, in a more magical imaginary way and also to revive the classic, the magical fables that I grew up with, which unfortunately nowadays they're not that common, so I really wanted to rescue that genre and share it with kids of this generation.

>> [Background Music] Well thank you so much for being with us today.

>> Thank you.

>> We are looking forward to your appearance at the National Book Festival on Saturday, September 29th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The event is free and open to the public. For more details and a list of participating authors, visit loc.gov/bookfest. Thank you for listening.