This is Cheryl Kennedy of the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 12th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The Festival, which is free and open to the public, will be two days this year, Saturday, September 22 from 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and Sunday, September 23 from noon to 5:30 p.m. The Festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall, rain or shine. For more details visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. It is now my pleasure to introduce author and cartoonist, Jeff Kinney, the creator of the best-selling and award winning Diary of a Wimpy Kid Series. Thank you so much for joining us.

Thank you for having me.

Your first book was published in 2007, and the Series is reported to have sold more than 75 million copies in print worldwide. Now, according to an article last month, you made Forbes' 15 highest earning authors list. What's the magic of a wimpy kid?

Well, I think it's the humor. I think that kids like to be entertained. They read for the same reason that adults do, is to be entertained, and I think that kids can open my books and see that, and I think that's what kids are responding to. And I think I have sort of a crutch or a secret weapon in my cartoons, is that I can pepper my books with these fun cartoon drawings that I think are appealing to kids as well.

What was the genesis of the series?

The genesis of the series was my failure to become a real cartoonist. I'd always wanted to become a newspaper cartoonist, and in fact I snuck into the Washington Post one time and got to be there at the department where they received cartoons. It was like magic to me. But that was my goal and my ambition, and I couldn't break in. I couldn't get anybody to accept my work, so I had to figure out a different way to get my cartoons to readers.

Well, you initially started out targeting adult readers. How did you transition into kids' books?

Actually, quite by accident. As I wrote my Wimpy Kids book for grown-ups, I thought that I was writing a nostalgia piece, and my publisher told me that I had not in fact written one giant 1,300 page book that was going to be in the humor section for grown-ups, but I had written a children's series that was going to come in 217 page installments. So that was big news to me. I didn't see it coming. In all of the years I was working on my books, in the 8 years that I was developing these stories I never for a second thought that I was writing for kids, so it's funny to me now to be a children's author.
Now your books have actually reached the White House. The President was reportedly seen recently purchasing your book among others. How does that make you feel, knowing the First Dad likes your work?

It was very cool. I think it's the first daughters who liked my book, in defense of Barack Obama. But I got to see pictures of the Obama shopping on a day that was meant to celebrate local businesses. And Sasha had one of my books in her hands. That was pretty exciting, and then I got to actually meet the Obamas in the White House a few months ago and to say thanks in person, and so that was very surreal. And actually I've gotten to meet the Bush 41 and Bush 43, two of our past presidents as well, so it's been -- I think the books are sort of politically neutral.

Now, book number 7 "Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Third Wheel" is scheduled to come out in November. Can you give us a sneak preview?

Well, I can tell you that I finished that book about 15 minutes ago, and Jeff sent it to the printer, so that was very exciting. I've been working on it for about 9 months, and the last month has been just brutal where I drew for about between 13 and 17 hours a day. But the book is about a big Valentine's Dance at Greg's school, and Greg wanting very much to go and to have a date, and this dance really turning his world upside down.

Now, what advice would you give to all the wimpy kids out there?

I would say that if you're in middle school or high school, that it would get better. It's not. It's not that fun. Not many people look back on their middle school years with warm feelings, so I think that if you can survive it, then you've succeeded. I was kind of a mix myself. I was kind of an average kid with some wimpy moments, but I wouldn't like to be back in my 7th grade body and experiences.

I don't think many of us would want to go back that far.

Right.

What's your advice for reaching reluctant readers? You've been very successful in doing that with your series.

I think -- you know, I don't feel really qualified to give advice on how to reach reluctant readers since I wasn't trying to reach them to begin with, but that might actually be the secret, is to not write to manipulate, to not write in such a way that you're anticipating that the reader might like it as a reluctant reader, but to instead write for yourself or write for an adult audience even, and then hope that kids aspire to it.

Now, you have two sons. How do they feel about your writing? Do they read your books?

It's funny. My older son, he started with Captain Underpants and sort of breezed over my books, and then he went right to really heavy stuff. He went to the Percy Jackson Series and Harry Potter, which he just
devoured at the end of 2nd grade, which was a pretty big shot to myself and my wife. And then my younger son hasn't quite gotten there yet. He's just entering 2nd grade and you know, we'll see if he likes my books. But I actually like the fact that my kids don't like my books too much. They're not too phased by all of this. And so we've been able to have really a normal life here in Massachusetts, and they just think of me as a normal dad.

>> Well, what's the toughest part of writing, especially for young people?

>> I think that the toughest part of writing, especially for young people, is the prospect of failure. It's easy to write and to get excited when you're energized and you know that there's a paycheck coming or you know that somebody will publish it. It's much harder to write when you're not so sure and the odds are against you. For three years I tried to get my cartoon syndicated, which actually isn't that long of a time, but it felt long to me, to put that much work into something and then to get a very impersonal, cold rejection letter was hard, hard on my ego. And then I would say that perseverance, it's the skill that a talented writer really needs to make sure their words are read.

>> Well, certainly the series has sold millions of print and audio books, but it's also the basis of series of movies. There are toys and games, and now a calendar. What's next for the Wimpy Kid?

>> Well, the kids have gotten a little too old probably to make another feature film, so we were lucky to make three while they were still actually in middle school, but I'm looking forward to the next step, the life of Wimpy Kid, which I think will be in animation. I'd be excited to do a holiday special which we're planning right now, and for television. So I would like to see Greg Heffley come to life in a way that he looks very similar to the way that he does in the book, so I'm excited about that next step.

>> Great. How has technology and social media changed how we read?

>> It's funny. Diary of a Wimpy Kid actually started off on a website, and it was just before blogs really came out. So it was almost like a blog in a way. And now I'm a little bit slow to step up to the ebook plate. I could bet that will happen very soon. But I think that the world has really changed a lot. It's convenient to get your books on e-readers, and it's had an effect on publishing, the whole publishing industry and on book stores as well. But I think that we as writers just need to focus on the content and know that whatever the technology is there's still going to be a need and a desire for good storytelling.

>> What book most influenced you as a child or as an adult?

>> I can't say which books influenced me. I'd say maybe that I enjoy the most were the Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing was one from Judy Blume, and there was also Freckle Juice and many others in that genre. I also read a lot of fantasy books by J.R. Tolkien and others as I got a little bit older.
This is your second appearance at the National Book Festival. What are some of your most memorable experiences from that festival, or the first festival that you attended in 2009, and also, did you have any interesting experiences interacting with your fans there?

Yeah, that was very exciting for me. I think it was a rainy day, and the tent was very crowded. There was just an energy at that festival. Also it was the first time that I ever got recognized, really, which was very strange for me, because I'm not really recognized even in my own home town. So being out on the Mall, I was walking around for like just a festival participant, and I drew a crowd. And then I had to get away from the crowd because it got too crowded. It was very -- an impact I've never had that happen since, so I don't know where my textual was printed to make people be able to recognize me, but it was a strange experience for me. But it was also very exciting because I had an interpreter by me, and I was fascinated with seeing what I was saying come to life in sign language, so that was pretty exciting.

Well, we've been hearing from author Jeff Kinney, who will appear on Saturday, September 22, on the Family Storytelling Stage at the 2012 National Book Festival, on the National Mall of Washington, D.C. Mr. Kinney, thank you for an enlightening conversation.

Thank you very much. Thanks for having me.

This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.