Shakespeare Unlimited: Shakespeare in YA Novels

Molly Booth
Ryan North
Interviewed by Barbara Bogaev

A Folger Shakespeare Library Podcast

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Music

Introduction

MICHAEL WITMORE: From the Folger Shakespeare library, this is Shakespeare Unlimited. I’m Michael Witmore, the Folger’s director. This podcast is called “The Quick Fire of Youth.” In 2015, the American Association of Publishers said that the US book and journal publishing industry generated $27.78 billion in net revenue. More than 15 percent of those sales came from one category, the portion of the industry called YA, or young adult literature.

While print sales of adult fiction are down in the last decade, the juvenile market, which includes YA, has actually gone up 40 percent. One reason may be that 80 percent of all YA titles are actually bought by people 10 years or more out of high school. Because this is a Folger podcast, you won’t be surprised when I tell you that Shakespeare is well represented on the YA shelves. Right now you can find 34 different Shakespeare related titles on the popular book site, Goodreads. Considering this genre’s popularity, we thought it made sense to have a couple of YA authors in to talk—about their writing, their audience, their inspiration, and the role that Shakespeare plays in all of it.

At the time we’re recording this, Molly Booth’s first novel, Saving Hamlet, has just been published by Disney Hyperion. It tells the story of an American teenager who time travels back to Shakespeare’s Globe during the original production of Hamlet.

Ryan North is the author of two titles, To Be or Not To Be and Romeo and/or Juliet, that take the “Choose Your Own Adventure” book phenomenon, that was popular with younger children 20 years ago, and update it with a winking teenager-y vibe.

Ryan and Molly are interviewed by Barbara Bogaev.

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BARBARA BOGAEV: Well, Ryan, let's start with you. I associate “Choose Your Own Adventure” books with the ‘90s. What made you want to write one, let alone one about Shakespeare?

RYAN NORTH: I mean I was a child of the ’90s, in that sense, so I was, I was familiar with the format, and the idea came to me, actually, I was turning over Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” speech, and I realized, like, oh, to be or not to be, it’s structured like a choice. Almost like those books I read when I was a kid. And my next thought was, “Oh my gosh, I have to write this book.” I was driving and so I spent, it was a long drive, two hours, and I spent it like realizing you know, what if you could choose which character you wanted to play, so you could play as Hamlet or Ophelia, or as Hamlet’s dad, King Hamlet. But if you choose him, you die in the first page, and play as a ghost. I finally get home, the first thing I do is I look up you know, has this been done before? And luckily it hadn’t, and then the funny part was, I hadn’t read the play since I was in high school, and this was about ten years out of high school. And I had forgotten how it started. I don’t remember how Hamlet started.

BOGAEV: That’s wonderful.

NORTH: So I started writing and I just stopped, and be like, wait, I got to reread the play and figure out what I’m actually doing here.

BOGAEV: Oh, that’s wonderful. I’m really getting the sense of your feverish brain, but for those of us who haven’t read or had the great pleasure of experiencing a “Choose Your Own Adventure” book, why don’t you remind us how it works.

NORTH: So this style of book is a book in which they’re usually written in the second person, so it says you do this, you do that. And at the end of each passage, the book asks you what you want to happen next? So it will say if you pick up the sword, turn to this page, or if you pick up the skull and talk about your feelings, turn to this page. And then by following that path, you can choose your own path through the book, and tell your own story or follow the Shakespeare path if you’re classical that way.

BOGAEV: Right, so you skip all around the book and you, if you follow a whole kind of plotline making all these decisions, you might not necessarily ever read the whole book ‘cause you’re only reading parts?

NORTH: Yeah, I mean, the nice thing about it is that each time you read it, you can choose a different path. Uh, it’s kind of, I’ve seen reviews of the book, people say, you know, I’m not sure if I review this because I’m never sure if I’m done reading it. There might still be paths I haven’t found yet. So it’s nice in that way that it’s a book that can always surprise you, years down the road—that still has something new to offer you.
BOGAEV: And you also choose to be a certain character, that’s really where you start your adventure right, you choose to be Hamlet, Ophelia, or the King of Denmark, or as you call him, Hamlet senior.

NORTH: Yeah, and then based on that, you can tell different stories. And the nice thing I mean, I started writing the book and like I said, I hadn’t read my Shakespeare for a while, and I had kind of forgotten who Ophelia’s character was, in my mind, she was just this really awesome, empowered, smart woman, and then I read the play and she’s not in the play, like she goes crazy and dies.

BOGAEV: I was gonna say, where did you get that image of Ophelia?

NORTH: I don’t know. I think I just, in high school we thought she was the coolest. And I can’t remember why. And so I just decided to write Ophelia the way I remembered her, and then I would explain away why she apparently you know, drowned in a lake or drowned in a river. It also worked in sort of reclaiming Shakespeare and make it a bit more feminist ‘cause these plays were written, you know, 400 years ago. And some things have changed in the past 400 years.

MOLLY BOOTH: Definitely, I think, I think Ophelia does have like, I don’t think that perspective is so off, I think there are some scenes that are pretty empowering for Ophelia, like the characters in my book definitely struggle with that. There are these young women and they’re trying to figure out how to play Ophelia, and whether it is a feminist character or not, so.

NORTH: I think she can be for sure.

BOGAEV: Oh, absolutely, I didn’t mean to, I didn’t mean to imply that there’s no possible way she could be, but I’m really glad you popped up too, Molly, because this leads me to my next question, is what recommends Hamlet to a young adult “Choose Your Own Adventure” format, or in your case, a kind of time travel format? Is it something about that play that both of you have chosen this or is that all Shakespeare plays lend themselves to this kind of treatment and this kind of age group because they deal with identity and self-determination?

BOOTH: Well, definitely for me, the reason that Hamlet popped into my mind was I, that was my first Shakespeare play that I really read in college, and I was kind of going through this weird identity crisis ‘cause you’re in college, and you know, and I really connected to Hamlet’s absolute uncertainty of what he was supposed to do in this situation. And obviously his “to be or not to be” speech and all of the language I felt like deep down in my soul, even though you know, something very different was happening to me. I was transferring schools, and Hamlet has a ghost dad come back and tell him to murder his uncle, so very different. But the language...

BOGAEV: Oh no, I see the thread—very clear thread there.
BOOTH: But the language you know, I really felt like when I came up with the, my main character, Emma, I really felt you know, came to her in the middle of a bit of an identity crisis, and really felt like Hamlet was a good fit for her because of that.

BOGAEV: And I’m going to go back to you, and we’re going to talk more about the plot of your book, but first, Ryan, I thought it was really interesting that you wrote in your introduction to Hamlet that this treatment, this “Choose Your Own Adventure” treatment is really faithful to the magic of Shakespeare as it was meant to be experienced. And this is a quote, “in a non-deterministic narrative structure where you end up thinking maybe you made a wrong decision so you mark the pages you were just on, so you can always go back and make a different choice, if you die for some dumb reason. To be or not to be, that is the adventure.”

NORTH: Sounds like something I wrote.

BOGAEV: This all was, as I was reading it, I was thinking, “Wow, this almost feels as if this is the way he read Shakespeare originally as a teenager.”

NORTH: Well the premise of the book, which is probably the most egotistical thing I’ve ever done, is that my “choose your own path” book is the original, and then Shakespeare read through the book once, and plagiarized Hamlet based off of my book—based off of my text. And so that all that sort of builds into this idea that this is Shakespeare restored, how it was meant to be read as this you know, ridiculous fun game book, and finally we can finally experience Shakespeare as it was always intended, by you know, sitting alone in a room with your fingers, stuck in a book, trying to hold your place and go back and make different choices.

BOOTH: I love it though! I was…

BOGAEV: Go big or go home. Right, with this idea. Molly, go ahead.

BOOTH: Oh, I was just gonna say that I actually have the Romeo and Juliet one on my Kindle, so I was doing it on my phone on the way here ’cause I haven’t done all of the possibilities, and I was just thinking about how you know, tragedy and a lot of Shakespeare tragedies trap their characters in impossible situations and you’re giving them an out, and it’s kind of amazing. Like, you don’t have to go down this terrible fate path.

NORTH: Yeah, that was actually… I wrote Romeo and/or Juliet and then I read this thing that Roger Ebert wrote before he passed, and he was talking about computer games, and he was arguing that you could never make a game version of Romeo and Juliet because you would break the characters. If they had the choice, if you gave them the choice to you know, not do a double suicide in a crypt, and they survived and had a happy ending, then the play is ruined. And I read this after already writing Romeo and/or Juliet, where you can absolutely not end up suiciding in a crypt, and I was like, “I think I disagree with you, Ebert.”
BOOTH: Yeah!

NORTH: But, I mean the characters aren’t broken, they’re, I feel like you know, you can talk, you can treat the characters like these are imaginary people designed to perform a single task, and if they don’t do that task, then they’re broken, but I think the core of them is that they’re these characters who are in this world, and they experience this thing, and when they zig instead of zag or go in a different direction, that doesn’t mean everything’s ruined.

What would it be like if Romeo had stopped to pick up some flowers, and so he delayed himself five minutes, and when he makes it to the crypt, Juliet has woken up, and they get their happy ending, and he gets to give her some flowers and everyone lives happily ever after? That’s what you want to happen, and it’s so satisfying to have that happen in one of the possible timelines of this story, ’cause you’re really not writing a single story, you’re writing a narrative cluster, a gestalt of possible narratives you can explore your way through.

BOGAEV: Oh, so that’s what you mean by, yeah, exploring the narrative space of Shakespeare as opposed to staying really true to the plot?

NORTH: Yeah.

BOGAEV: I did think while reading your “Choose Your Own Adventure” book whether, in the back of your mind, you might have the goal that, oh, I hope someone does get to the end of the plot that really resembles Shakespeare, so that they walk away kind of knowing what happened.

NORTH: Oh yeah, yeah, that’s why the books have little markers. There’s skulls in To Be or Not To Be, showing the Shakespeare path through the book. And Romeo and Juliet have hearts next to the choices, so if there’s a choice that Shakespeare took to get his play you can follow the hearts and get it. And I’ve talked to people who have really tried to read the books that way, but it’s hard, because you’re following the story that you probably already know, and it’s all these fun options you can do otherwise. But it is possible to recover Shakespeare’s play. And I sort of, I was worried that—and Molly might’ve felt the same thing—when you’re doing stuff with Shakespeare, I feel like the fear is that there’ll be these, you know, dusty Shakespeare scholars who come out of the woodwork and say “Who are you to desecrate the Bard?”

But that doesn’t happen because none of us are trying to destroy all extant copies of Hamlet or other plays. We’re building stuff on top it or around it or beside it. And it doesn’t diminish the original work. Hopefully it adds to it and gives you another way to approach it.

BOGAEV: And that brings us back to this issue of teenagers encountering Shakespeare ’cause one thing I’ve noticed with my kids and books that they chose to read for fun when they were teenagers is that they like the sense of discovering something or someone new, and they almost always choose not to read the authors that they’re assigned in school. You know, that’s
just so much cooler finding something new than reading the greatest playwright who ever lived, you know, which is so establishment. So was that also in the back of your mind as you were writing, Molly?

**BOOTH:** To tell you the truth, I, well, I guess what happened to me is I had this big Shakespeare awakening and I was like, “Wow, I really wish I had, you know, connected with this earlier; these texts do so much for me.” I know that there are people who have approached or have learned about Shakespeare through avenues that have not been necessarily helpful for them, and I was home schooled in high school, so I really kind of thought about *Saving Hamlet* in that kind of way. Like here’s a different avenue where a kid might connect with this text. But I do know a lot of Shakespeare enthusiasts who are teens, so I was kind of trying to straddle the line of writing something that I thought would be accessible for the Shakespeare noob, and then you know, something that a Shakespearean aficionado would also enjoy reading.

**BOGAEV:** And let’s tell people more about your book, *Saving Hamlet*, and if I had to give the elevator pitch, it would be that *Hamlet* meets *Alice in Wonderland*. Right?

**BOOTH:** Ooh!

**BOGAEV:** You have Emma who’s a high school stage manager, and she falls through the trapdoor in her school stage, and she lands in Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre during the original production of that play and she learns a lot about life and love too. So…

**BOOTH:** Well, yeah, yeah. A little, definitely a little bit about love. She’s got crushes on everybody. She’s like, you know, me when I was 15. I just liked everybody that, you know, I had an activity with. So, she’s…

**BOGAEV:** She’s a teenager.

**BOOTH:** I, right, I don’t, I don’t worry too much about that, I really feel like the point of the book is really like her learning to, you know, be a really good stage manager and learning her value and her own worth, in the two theaters that she’s working in. So for sure. That’s a really great pitch though. I should…

**BOGAEV:** I’m glad you liked it.

**BOOTH:** I’ve also heard it as *Shakespeare in Love* meets *Back to the Future*, which is another one I really enjoy.

**NORTH:** Yeah.
BOGAEV: Oh, that’s a, that’s good, and to explain, you have two stagings of *Hamlet* going on in your play, one in modern time and one in the past. So what did get you thinking about this time travel kind of fantasy kind of story?

BOOTH: Well I was just learning… *Saving Hamlet* is my first book, and I was just learning to write fiction when the idea came to me. I had been someone who was really into screenwriting and playwriting for a long time. And I thought that’s what I would do, and then I took a fiction workshop, and I really enjoyed it, and I started taking a Shakespeare history course around the same time, and so those two things kind of blended together, and I do have this big theater nerd background. In high school, I stage managed for three different community theaters in my area, which nearly killed me but was amazing.

And I got really excited reading about the backstage of the Globe Theater, and how it worked and how fast paced and passionate and crazy everything was back there. And I realized I really wanted to go back in time and work there and in lieu of that, I would send a character. So, it started out as a short story about a teenage stage manager, who went back in time, and then it grew into a novella, and then at one point my professor was like, “Molly this is a novel, we can’t kid ourselves anymore. It’s too long.”

BOGAEV: So you did do a lot of research for the book and I really did like some of the descriptions of the Globe. You had some period details. How did you decide how faithful to be to the time period and to the details?

BOOTH: Basically I tried to be as faithful as I could be. I was a junior in college, and I was designing a lot of my own courses. I went to Marlboro College, and they let you design your own courses and do one on one stuff with your professor. And Paul Nelson, who’s this wonderful Shakespeare scholar, he was a theater and history professor there, and so we just read anything we thought might be relevant to learning about Elizabethan times, and learning about how rehearsals and shows ran, so I read a lot of Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* and *The Shakespearean Stage*. I read *The Time Traveler’s Guide to Elizabethan England*, by Ian Mortimer, which I highly recommend—a great book.

BOGAEV: That’s a wonderful book.

NORTH: Sounds great.

BOOTH: And also written in second person, and kind of like, this is how you would operate in Elizabethan England, so really cool.

NORTH: Wow.
BOOTH: And then I also really relied on *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* by Tiffany Stern. So all of that and then we also took a trip to London, because we felt it was really important for me to see and experience the replicated Shakespeare’s Globe there, as well.

BOGAEV: So a lot of research but that can sometimes really tie people down. Did you feel that you had... I’ve got to depart from this, I’m going to make some stuff up?

BOOTH: Yeah, you know, I, at first I think I thought, “Oh, I’ll be so historically accurate,” like you know, “I’m going to make this foolproof.” I really, I did feel some pressure, as Ryan was talking about, I did feel some pressure like, “Oh you know, I’m just a college student, if I publish this, you know, one day, will every Shakespeare history scholar hate me?” You know, so I felt this, I felt this pressure to somehow make it perfect. But the more research I did, the more I realized that there was absolutely no way to do that. You know, I would come in to class with my professor and be like, “Okay, I need to know, you know, what kind of blood they used for *Henry V*, and I need to know how they did this, this and this.” You know, and he would be like, “Molly, we don’t know how they did any of that.” So, I just started trying to become accustomed to filling things in and that kind of gave me a lot of freedom because then I realized I, a) was writing a historical fiction book, and it was you know, I wasn’t tied down, and I could fill things in that would work for Emma and for her story, so that’s kind of where I settled on that. The dialogue—that was definitely a big decision because I struggled with wanting to do stuff really, really accurate and then realizing that was super unreadable. So.

BOGAEV: And Molly, how did you think about Shakespeare? Shakespeare’s very present in those scenes in your book, in the Globe as the writer and the director. I really enjoyed how withdrawn and cranky he was. What did you base your descriptions of his personality on?

BOOTH: Well, you know, I was really, really intimidated to write Shakespeare. It took me a long time to... you know, I have this idea, I knew exactly what I wanted to happen in the story, but to actually sit down and start writing Shakespeare as a character was incredibly intimidating. I actually didn’t do it until I was in a workshop and they gave us ten minutes to write and I was like, “You know what, if you don’t do it now, you’re never going to.” So, when I first started writing him, I just in the moment did, and then I took a long time to think about how I saw Shakespeare and then I really had to separate him from a historically correct person, much like the history, and just start thinking of him as the insanely genius, temperamental director of the Chamberlain’s Men. So, you know, I draw on some community theater experiences, you work with all kinds of directors. And I rolled a couple people into one, you know, and I’ve obviously brought my own stuff to him, and I just really imagined this person who, the only thing that mattered to him was getting the plays going and getting them up and you know, whether he bulldozed other people, whether he made everyone miserable, that didn’t really matter to him at all, what really mattered to him was his words.

BOGAEV: Yeah, that’s great, there’s a scene where everyone’s getting really rowdy, and he’s just off in the corner writing. Not paying attention to anyone.
BOOTH: Oh, yeah. I do love that scene.

BOGAEV: Ryan, your series is so playful and so by-the-seat-of-the-pants. How much did you think about this historical accuracy angle?

NORTH: I mean, not as much as Molly.

BOGAEV: That's okay.

NORTH: No, my guiding idea was this, I wanted the book to be as accessible as possible, and also I wasn’t going to get too hung up over the particular time period, because I mean this is a comedy book, that’s meant to be read for funsies. And so like one of Ophelia’s endings is that she can invent the thermometer ahead of schedule and be like, “I just invented the thermometer, here it is.” And—

BOGAEV: Right, and we should say that your Ophelia is an awesome character. She’s a scientist.

NORTH: Yeah, she’s a… she invented indoor heating, or she did in one of the endings you can get there. So, it was that idea of, “It takes place in a particular time and place, but I’m not going to be too worried about stuff around it.” I felt bad, you know, adapting Shakespearean language into modern-day slang, because it feels like that's the sort of thing you should feel bad about, but I was also putting in the original one, as sort of a hedge, so I wouldn’t feel too bad.

Molly, you’re saying how you were sort of intimidated by writing Shakespeare as a character. A friend of mine… I designed the cover for the book myself, where it says, you know, “To Be or Not To Be, by Ryan North, William Shakespeare, and You,” because you’re making the choices. And my friend was like, “Hey, congrats on getting top billing above William Shakespeare.” And I was like, “Oh, I designed the cover myself, didn’t even realize that.” So clearly I had no qualms of being like, yeah, you know, me and then Shakespeare. Not afraid of that guy.

BOGAEV: Well, while we’re talking about Ophelia, though, can we talk about gender? Because I think it’s really interesting that Molly, your protagonist is a girl, and the play you’re working with stars a boy, Hamlet. And in your case Ryan, as you said, in your Hamlet, Ophelia is very self-fulfilled and she’s a scientist, and you can choose to have her follow a really impressive scientific career, and in your Romeo and Juliet, you can choose to have a Juliet who becomes a kind of superhero-pirate type. And it seems that you are both really exploring playing against type with gender, and of course gender fluidity is such a touchstone among so many teenagers right now. So how much thought did you put into themes of gender and gender-bending in writing your choose-your-adventure stories?
NORTH: I mean with Ophelia, I just assumed she was always that way and I was wrong, but I made her that way, as we talked about. With Romeo and/or Juliet, Romeo, I felt, was very easy to get a handle on. He’s a guy who’s in love with love. He wants to be in love with someone—done, like, there’s your Romeo, that explain everything he does.

But Juliet’s trickier, because you know, these teens make some bad choices, some bad decisions, and I was like, who is Juliet? Why is she doing this? And what made sense for me was having her be someone who sort of is trapped in her parents’ house or parents’ castle all the time, she doesn’t see a lot of guys, which makes Romeo special because he’s like the first super-attractive guy she sees. And also I thought, “You know, if she’s locked at home all day, she’s clearly gonna work out ‘cause there’s nothing else to do. So what if there’s this really buff Juliet, who when Romeo can talk his way out of problems, Juliet has muscles, she can solve her problems with her fists?” And that was a much more interesting character to write. I thought it made Romeo and Juliet’s relationship make sense. And I just love the idea of a muscle-y Juliet who will not take crap off people because she is super buff, and ready to solve her problems with her, you know, amazing pecs and sweet glutes, or whatever.

BOGAEV: And Molly, how did you think about gender and the book and what place it would play in your book because Emma’s best friend—the main character’s best friend—is in the process of coming out as bisexual.

BOOTH: Right, right. Well, you know, for me gender and sexuality are kind of two different moving parts and so for Saving Hamlet, I was really interested in kind of modernizing this play and having kids who have you know, modern great ideas of gender, getting to kind of struggle and think about how that fits in with these very, needless to say, old-fashioned texts, so how does a feminist young woman play Ophelia in a way that can satisfy her, in a way that she feels like she’s portraying something positive for people on the stage? And that was a big problem for Lulu, and Emma kind of brings her a little bit of the solution by bringing Alexander Cook, who was an actor who was known for playing female roles, female tragic roles, to…he bursts through the trapdoor and comes to modern times and kind of shows a different way to play Ophelia where she is this empowered person, but is very stuck in a world that doesn’t understand her at all, and is constantly kind of beating her down with all these different men telling her what to do and she, Lulu, decides basically that this is a character who is kind of representing what happens to young women who are subjected to so much sexism and so much repression their whole lives. So that’s where she ends with that.

And then Emma does have a piece where she gets her hair cut really short; she kind of steps outside of her, you know, gender box, if we’re thinking of it very traditionally, and that kind of opens up a lot of different things for her. So, I got my haircut really short when I was in high school and that kind of changed a lot for me and empowered me a lot, so I wanted a character to have a similar experience and it just ended up working out really well because you know, how many Shakespearean characters are disguised as, you know, a different gender. So that all really fit well together.
BOGAEV: Right, there’s such an intertwining of the themes, between, of Shakespearean themes as well as young adult themes in both of your books.

BOOTH: Ryan, I was really impressed that Romeo and Juliet has, Romeo and/or Juliet has such a focus on consent in your book. I loved that. I was, like, falling over at how well that was done. Just, you know, every time Romeo’s like, “Well, you know, Rosaline, I’m really, really in love with her, and all these things,” and his friends are all like, “Yeah, well, it doesn’t really matter how you feel.” I was like, “Yes, this is great!”

NORTH: It was really satisfying to write too, because Romeo is so moony and it’s like, his friends were like, “Look, your feelings are your problem here. They’re not her problem, you need to deal with this.” Sort of, what you want to shake him and say all throughout the play.

BOOTH: Yeah, and what a great way to address rape culture on that level. Absolutely, just you know, like, “No, what you want doesn’t matter in this scenario if she doesn’t want this too.” So, I thought it was wonderfully done.

NORTH: Absolutely. Oh, thank you. You always, you try not to make it preachy, right? I just try to have here’s a way that you can live your life that is less horrible. Let’s do that.

BOOTH: Yes. Absolutely, I loved it, I loved it. I tried to use similar things in Saving Hamlet.

BOGAEV: I do have some down and dirty though publishing questions for you. And I wondered, Molly, what the process was like getting a publisher for this book? How receptive were publishers to the idea of a young adult novel based on Shakespeare?

BOOTH: Well, you know, there are a lot of things that publishers liked and didn’t like about my book. And it was funny, I don’t really think Shakespeare played as much as, was much of a player in terms of whether or not they liked it, so much as the time travel piece of it, which was pretty funny and shocking to realize. You know, I’m a big fantasy—

BOGAEV: I thought that would be a slam dunk.

BOOTH: I’m a big fantasy nerd, so I just assumed everyone wants to read a time travel book, but this is not the case, I guess. But the Shakespeare part was, once I found the right person, Kieran Viola—Kieran Scott is her author name. She is a huge Shakespeare nerd. We met up and had lunch and talked about Shakespeare for a long time, and actually I got a two-book deal and when I kind of laid out for her what I was thinking, the next book to be, she really wanted me to do another Shakespeare novel. So she was really into it, so for me the process was pretty easy actually.
BOGAEV: Well, I’m curious what kind of reaction or comments either of you have gotten from English teachers of Shakespeare about your books? And are any of them using the books in novel ways in the classroom?

BOOTH: I will defer to Ryan since mine just came out.

NORTH: I’ve had a couple people on Twitter being like, “Oh, well, we can use this in class, this is great.” I haven’t yet read any essays students have written based on the book, but I really would love to, I would love to see an essay a student writes when they’re assigned to read Romeo and Juliet, and instead they read Romeo and/or Juliet and try to pass it off like they read the actual play. Because there’s going to be so much that’s wrong.

BOGAEV: Split the difference.

BOOTH: Oh my god, I might pass that idea to some people.

NORTH: Like, the whole muscles thing is not there in the text. Yeah, I would love to read it, I would love to read it. Um, but I think there’s room for having fun with Shakespeare and the themes and the context and everything else around it.

BOGAEV: Although you did have to fund your book through a Kickstarter? Why? I’m assuming you tried the traditional route and got turned down?

NORTH: Yeah, I actually, I just got an agent, and I was like, “Here’s a book I just wrote!” And he was like, “Oof, uh, don’t think I can sell this. It’s choose... it’s non-linear, second person Shakespeare. Like, there’s no market for that.” And I was already planning to do a Kickstarter, so I said, “Well, great, I’ll do the Kickstarter, I was going to do it anyway, we’ll see how it goes.” And it went really well. And then when I wrote Romeo and/or Juliet, the sequel book. We sort of had the Kickstarter to point to and be like, “This is a thing that people would like to read.” And so it was a lot easier at that point to put it through an actual publisher, and have it get into actual bookstores and stuff, which is, you know, always exciting— self-publishing’s great, but it’s also fun to be able to tell your grandmother where she can get your book, and not have to give her a website.

BOGAEV: Well, Molly, is Shakespeare your jam now, for all eternity? Is that the source of your creative inspiration? Or are you going to move on to other classics, are we going to see a Leaves of Grass-time travel book?

BOOTH: You know, I hope we do, but I will certainly not be writing it. Yeah, no, Shakespeare’s my jam. I actually did try to write a book, a young adult book, that had no Shakespeare in it, and I gave up about 50 pages in, and I was like, “Wow, this is just really, really not me.”

NORTH: Really?
BOOTH: Yes, so pretty much every idea I have… and you know, I'm a volunteer Shakespeare director too, and like that's really my thing, and I think that's really where I draw inspiration from. It's just endless, you know. I go back to these texts, and there’s more and more and more and more, and that’s really how I write. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to step outside of it, but I’m completely content here. Like, if I could write a YA adaptation of every Shakespeare play ever written, that would be wonderful.

BOGAEV: Well this was just such a pleasure, you two, thank you so much.

BOOTH: Oh, thank you so much.

NORTH: Thank you for having us, this was great.

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WITMORE: Molly Booth’s book, Saving Hamlet, was published in 2016 by Disney-Hyperion. Ryan North’s book, To Be or Not To Be, was originally self-published in 2013 and was Kickstarter’s most funded publishing project at the time. His second, Romeo and/or Juliet, was published by Riverhead Books in 2016. Molly and Ryan were interviewed by Barbara Bogaev. If you’re looking for holiday gifts for young people and this podcast has inspired you, we have a list of YA titles on the Folger blog, Shakespeare & Beyond, that’s at shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu.

“The Quick Fire of Youth” was produced by Richard Paul. Garland Scott is the associate producer. It was edited by Gale Kern Pastor, and Ester Ferington. We had technical help from Thomas Devlin at WGBH in Boston, Gord Richards at Oak Recording Studio Toronto, and Jeff Peters at the Marketplace Studios in Los Angeles. Shakespeare Unlimited comes to you from the Folger Shakespeare Library home to the world’s largest Shakespeare collection, the Folger is dedicated to advancing knowledge and the arts. You can find more about the Folger at our website, www.folger.edu. For the Folger Shakespeare Library, I'm Folger Director Michael Witmore.