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**Speaker 1** [00:00:13] Hello there, I'm Cressida Cowell the author and illustrator of How to Train Your Dragon, Wizards of Once, and Which Way to Anywhere, my new book series. And I'm so glad you've joined me for the Reading is Magic Festival. Sometimes things that you do or say have a way of turning into something bigger than you imagined and carrying on longer than you thought they would. Like the Reading is Magic Festival, which started in 2020 when I was the Waterstones Children's Laureate. It was inspired by my belief that reading is magic, and magic is for everyone. All the events during the festival explore the themes of the charter I wrote when I was a laureate and celebrate all the things you have the right to: creativity, having a planet to read on, seeing yourselves in a book, reading for the joy of it, and getting brilliant advice about books and about reading from people whose job it is to do that. I hope you enjoy this event.

**Lauren Layfield** [00:01:32] Hi. I'm Lauren. I'm a TV presenter. I'm currently wearing a flowery little top, today. I have got brown wavy hair and you currently find me in my kitchen with this brilliant Reading is Magic Festival bunting behind me, because that's exactly what we're celebrating. Reading is Magic Festival. I hope you're really enjoying it just like I am. And right now it is over to Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean. This is very exciting. Where we're going to join Alake Pilgrim and her book, Zo and the Forest of Secrets, which is a fantastical adventure on the island of Trinidad. So let's join Alake now.

**Alake Pilgrim** [00:02:16] Hi. My name is Alake Pilgrim, and I'm the author of Zo and the Forest of Secrets. It's published by Knights of. And it's a fantasy adventure with futuristic twists set on the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Right now, I'm a black woman with glasses and short hair, sitting in a garden, surrounded by trees, flowers and chirping birds. And I'm so happy to be part of this Reading is Magic Festival. Hi. I wrote Zo and The Forests of Secrets to really celebrate Nature and the landscape of the island that I'm from, but also to celebrate my little son, who was actually quite sick when he was younger and once he miraculously got better, I just wanted to celebrate children who face all kinds of difficulties. But in the end, they survive and they and they do well. So I grew up reading fantasy adventures and loving them like The Chronicles of Narnia or The Dark is Rising series. But I didn't read any that was set in the Caribbean, where I'm from, and none of these stories starred children who look like me or the children around me. So it's really exciting to me to be able to set a fantasy adventure series in the place that I'm from. So while the story is a fantasy adventure with futuristic twist, it's set on this actual island of Trinidad where I am right now and where I'm from. So it's inspired by the hills, the caves, the swamps, the beaches and the forest that actually exists on the northeast coast of Trinidad. And in the book, you find a lot of animals, real animals like manatees, red howler monkeys, leatherback turtles that are actual animals that exist in the real world. In addition to these strange, fantastical creatures that fill the book. The main characters in the book, Zo Joseph and Adri Khan. A girl and a boy who find themselves lost in the forest near this village called Samaan Bay and strange, fantastical creatures and dangerous adults are after them, but they don't know exactly why. To me, two of the scariest creatures are the flesh skinner, which is kind of inspired by dinosaurs, since that's a creature that my son loves. But also the X and the X to me were a blend of giant centipedes that you find in South America and in parts of Trinidad. And I just put them on a much bigger scale, much larger. And they're also blended with technology. So they're a blend of robotics. They're robots. They have some artificial intelligence, and they also are part centipede. I also really was inspired by Anansi Stories. I don't know how many of you all knew about Anansi, but he's a mythical creature from West African stories that travelled all throughout the world with people from that part of the world and Anansi is part human, part spider, part

supernatural, magical creature. And my anansi in the book are actually even more different because they're female anansi, they're girls, they're woman. And they also have a blend of mechanical and technological arms, eyes, legs. So they're a kind of combination of nature and technology. So you might be wondering why combine nature with technology and futuristic parts of this story? Well, to me, when people think about the Caribbean, you might think of beaches or, you know, forests or even coral reefs. But when you come to the Caribbean, you realise that the technology, futuristic buildings, robotics, genetically modified foods, everything that you find in every other parts of the world is also right here. So to me, it felt natural to combine technology that's all around us with the nature that's all around us as well. I love Trinidad and Tobago. I mean, I hope that those of you who have never been get to visit it someday and those of us who actually live here, I hope that more of us go out and see different parts of these two islands. Trinidad is two islands for those who don't know that make up one country. And where all the way down to the south of the Caribbean, just off the coast of South America. You can see Venezuela from here. And so Trinidad is a place where people have come from all over the world. They've come from China, India, Africa, Europe, the Middle East and many other parts of the world. And so to me, that's a really special mix of people, actually. I think all of you could look like you come from Trinidad if you come in a plane here and you look around. Chances are you're going to see somebody who looks like you. So remember I was telling you about Anansi Stories? Stories that came from West Africa and travelled to the Caribbean and all around the world. Well, in Trinidad we start Anansi stories with a call and response. I say crick and you say crack. Let's give it a try now. Crick. Crick. One more time. Crick. 'Monkey break he back for ah piece ah pomerac'. I don't know why we say that. When do you think I started writing this book? How many years ago? You want to give it a guess? Well, it was actually back in 2014. Yes, I know that you're in shock. You can't imagine so long ago. But this book took me years to write. And I know I'm not supposed to say this, but I actually wanted to give up many times. I think that in life, whenever you're doing something really interesting, it can also be really hard. And many times I wanted to give up. Sometimes I even did give up sitting down crying, thinking, This book will never be finished. But here it is, it is finished. And so I would say, you know, for anybody who is writing or actually for anything that you're doing, just really don't give up. Keep going. Try your best not to give up. Keep going. Read, try and meet other people who are doing what you're doing. And if you can't Google it, yeah. Find something about it online. But the key thing about it, the most important part is to keep doing it. Okay. So I just wanted to boast a little bit about the publisher Knights Of. They're an amazing publisher in the UK who's making books for all different kinds of children, telling different kinds of stories. And this year they won the British Book Awards, children's book publisher of the Year. So please give Knights Of a little round of applause. We're very proud of them. Zo And The Forest of Secrets is a magical fantasy adventure for those of you who love Percy Jackson and Katherine Rundell's The Explorer. It's a book that combines adventure in nature with fantasy and futuristic twists.

**Alake Pilgrim** [00:09:29] Now, I'll read you an excerpt from my book, Zo and the Forest of Secrets.

**Alake Pilgrim** [00:09:37] It was barely dawn, but the crowd and the rest of the market was as thick as ants on a pile of sweets. People had come from the surrounding villages to buy and sell their goods. For once, the half dead village was pulsing and alive in the crescent shaped market calypso, soca, chutney, reggae, dancehall, jazz, pop afrobeats, filmi and gospel music blasted from the open stores. Vendors shouted on the pink, green and blue tarps, chatting loudly over the noise, catching up on news and selling everything from mangoes to underwear, saltfish to yard fowl, car parts, coconuts and 'cool in the ice'

drinks. Sweat stuck my T-shirt to my back. Somehow I'd wandered out here away from all the action. A drink of water sounded great right now. I turned to go. 'Girl, listen quick. I don't have much time.' The old man's voice froze me in my tracks. My mouth jumped open. Something caught my eye. Was this for real? The old man's coat seemed to change shape every time he moved. The patterns and colours shifted as if the coat had a life of its own. I looked closer. It was almost like it was rustling, moving, taking the shape of my face.

**Lauren Layfield** [00:11:18] Ah, thank you so much, Alake, for allowing us to be a part of Zo and Adri's ventures and also a massive thank you to Bocas Lit Fest for programming that event. It was absolutely brilliant. Now, if you want to find out what happens next in their adventure, why not head over to the Reading is Magic website where you can find out how to buy the book or perhaps have a word with your local library and see if they've got a copy you can borrow. And thanks so much for joining us today. And we hope to see you another event very, very soon.