



Episode #186:

**Author and illustrator Samantha Cotterill Discusses
Her New Children's Book Series, Little Senses**

December 3, 2019

Debbie: Hello Samantha, welcome to the podcast.

Samantha: Thank you. Hello, I'm so excited.

Debbie: I'm excited for this conversation. Listeners for a little context, Samantha reached out to me to share with me a book series that she has created which, I get a lot of pitches, several a day, from people who have their own projects and so forth and so on. And this is one, I was like, send me those books. And I got the books and like I wrote back, I think within an hour I'm like, oh my god, these are amazing and I need to bring you on the show. So I'm really excited to share your work with our community and I always like to start by hearing more about the guests. So if you could spend a few minutes and just tell us a little bit about who you are in the world and what you do and why you do it.

Samantha: Well, I'm a picture book author and illustrator and I've been a freelance illustrator for probably about 20 years, but it's only been in the last five or so that I've gone full time into picture books. And I go back and forth between writing them or I'll illustrate for other authors and my work comprises of 2D and 3D. So some of my books are done in 3D set up medium and others are done two dimensionally like the Little Senses series. And I work full time at my studio in upstate New York and this Little Senses series was the first time that I've done something of a series based kind of work and it's a very personal project and just really excited to share it with everyone today.

Debbie: So tell us about the Little Senses. I, you know, I'm an author as well and so I'm always kind of wanting to know the whole origin process and how you found a publisher. But, but just to get started, can you tell us a little bit about the series as a whole, who it's for and what your vision was when you created it?

Samantha: Sure. Well, Little Senses is a four book series for the moment and depending on how well it does, it may continue beyond that. And the series is basically for kids with sensory sensitivities that may or may not be on the autism spectrum and they're written in a way that are lighthearted, gentle, easy to approach, without any labels or qualitative adjectives within the story themselves. That opens it up to be a connection for kids in a broader audience that may not necessarily be on the spectrum or may share some isms or just sensitive kids in general. And they're done in that lighthearted approach that for kids that may not be open to having a diagnosis and may be a little bit resistant, we're wanting to give them reading materials to help them see that they're not alone and there's a lot of other kids that see the world the way they do.

Presenting them with books that don't scream out on the cover a label or like you have ADD or Millie is fidgety that they may be more responsive to wanting to pick up that book and read the book and may recognize themselves, which in

itself would help spark a conversation between caregiver and child or teacher and child that can help set them on a path of understanding a bit more about themselves and gaining any tools that they may need as they navigate the world growing up.

Debbie: So can you tell us a little bit about why this book series? Why were you inspired to create this?

Samantha: Well, my, it's something that I've always wanted to do. It's been in the back of my head and my agent Kirsten Hall was really the instigator in terms of, she just gave me the push and the encouragement to put these out there simply because these are books I wish I had had as a child. I grew up in the seventies and eighties, so clearly it wasn't as known as it is today and I just grew up in a world of feeling like I was awkward, I was the odd one out. And there were quote unquote isms within myself that I thought of as negative traits and didn't really quite understand why I would think certain ways about things that no one else around me felt the same way. And if I had these books it would have helped me to kind of gain more self confidence and not feel, have such a low self esteem going into those crucial years of social interactions and just growing up. I think these would have just been so helpful for me. And that's part of why I thought I have this ability to write something and illustrate something and put it out into the world and why not create something that can help others and possibly create a connective relationship within families that I have the chance to provide. So why not go for it? Let's give it a shot.

Debbie: And I'm curious to know what the response was, like when your agent pitched this. Was it, first of all, you can share with us who the publisher is, but I'm just wondering, was it something that the publisher got, you know right away or, or can you tell us a little bit about that?

Samantha: Yeah. Well we, when we put the pitch together, I wrote a rough draft for *Nope. Never. Not For Me!* which was the first one that I had written and we put together a package that included the manuscript for *Nope. Never.* with a couple sample art images and then just some suggestive title ideas of future books, knowing that we wanted to put a series together. And an open pitch was created for the series and when it came down to a couple of publishers that were really interested in the series, there was one in particular with Kate Harrison at Dial books for young readers that just instantly she just reacted with such an emotional like, yes, this is something we need.

We need to get more of these out there. We really love what you're doing. And there was just a reaction from her that I knew that this was the person that I needed to make these books with. And they were just from from day one so supportive and encouraging and allowing me the control of what was important to put in there and all the subtleties that in just kind of the mainstream children's book world, there were a lot of little details that maybe I couldn't have done otherwise. But because of this series and of her trust in what I was doing, we were able to create something that I felt was just so special. And yeah.

Debbie: No, that's great. I think it's so important to find the right partners for these projects. And so that's exciting. You know, that's what we want is people to be like, yes, I totally get this and we need more of this. And I always talk about the big paradigm shift that we're trying to push through here. And that involves what you've created, you know, it involves, you know, us getting more content, more media out there that shows a different perspective that challenges this kind of quote unquote typical experience that we know not so many kids actually experience, you know?

Samantha: Yeah. And what was great about Kate with working on these books is just really trusting in the way it was written. Especially with like I wanted to make sure that the dialogue from the caretaker was short and sweet and it had to be delivered in very short sentences and not too descriptive. Just to keep in mind that a lot of kids can only take in so much auditory information before shutting off. And even in the details such as the third book that'll be coming out soon, *Can I Play Too?*, I purposely put some tiny detail changes simply for the fact that if you're in the office and going for maybe a diagnosis and you have the child looking at the book, certain children may open the book and go, oh, there's a stripe on the sweater on this page but it wasn't on an earlier page.

And in the rest of the picture books that I've done, you're scrutinizing and going through every page to make sure that every single detail is consistent. And I was so excited that Kate allowed me to purposely make subtle detail changes that could come across as errors to other people. But for me, I felt like it was an important little detail to include. And also even the eye contact. I made sure that, especially with that third book, that the eyes weren't directly looking at the teacher's eyes for the majority of the book. And it's just those subtle details that when you add them all up together, I was just hoping to create a piece that would just really connect and resonate with a lot of readers that could really see themselves in these books.

Debbie: That's so cool. I didn't, I didn't get that in reading through these. And I love that you took such care to provide those kinds of little nuances. It's really awesome. So what I would love actually if you're up for doing this, is just tell us a little bit about each of the four books. I know that, you know, one of them is coming out in the spring and then the fourth one you just wrapped up, but just to give readers a sense of the themes that they cover, could you tell us a little bit about them?

Samantha: Sure. So the first one that I had written was called *Nope. Never. Not For Me!* And that's basically about exploring new foods and learning how to try new food when you may be in your quote unquote rut of always having the same foods, which I'm still like, I'm still that way today, but it's gotten a lot better as an adult. And it's just instead of having your basic kind of standard plot of trying a food that you didn't think you would like and then suddenly liking it, here we have a situation where a child is faced with a food that she's not at all interested in, but she gets to try it through not only taste but through quote unquote playing with the food, touching the food, kissing the food, just really getting to know the food and get a relationship where she then has the courage to try something. And she doesn't end up liking it.

But what she's learned is that she can try foods and it may encourage her to try more. And just also using a passion of hers as a way to get her interested in trying new foods. So she's a very dinosaur obsessed girl and when she discovers that she doesn't like this piece of broccoli, she's just devastated because she always thought she was a plant eater. And as her mother points out, well she's a triceratops using the words, try with a t-r-y. And in that case, just giving her that connection to something she loves would get her really excited about trying new foods. And so this was just all about exploring and learning how to try something and just be excited in the successes of being able to do that.

This Beach Is Loud! was the second one that came out and this one is about sensory overload situations that can arise when you're going to a new place that may be just much more loud than you expected or crowded and how all of that coming at you can create a situation where you just explode and just giving you tools on how to handle and recognize when things are starting to get a little bit tough inside. Whether it's just all the sensory input is just taking over and how can you get through that situation to a place where you can enjoy what you're doing. And I wanted to pick a location that wasn't too obvious in the beginning in terms of like a mall or another area where you would expect it to be loud and overcrowded and cause sensory stimulation overload. And it was kind of between an apple orchard and a beach. But I purposely here placed them in a beach that wasn't very crowded. But to him it's very crowded. And that was another important distinction for this series in particular was that I really wanted to stress that in this situation, this beach may not be crowded at all to a neurotypical viewer, but for this child, this beach is very crowded and loud. And how does he cope with, his father will give him tools to help him cope.

The third book, *Can I Play Too*, is set in the classroom and it's basically learning social cues on how to recognize when someone you're playing with may need you to stop or maybe take a moment and think about how you're interacting and what tools you can gain to be able to foster like a really good relationship when it comes to playing side by side with a friend. And the fourth book that I've just written is going to be about a young girl having a couple of friends over for a birthday party and learning how to handle change when unexpected change occurs within the party setting. So that one won't be coming out for another full year from March. But that's basically the summation of the four.

Debbie: It's so awesome. I, and I even love, you know, I hadn't thought of this, I loved the *This Beach Is Loud!* book. But yeah, I mean I think we think about amusement parks or you know, these more obvious spaces that can be overwhelming. And so I just, again, love the care and the thoughtfulness to create an environment that from a neurotypical point of view, wouldn't seem like it would be overwhelming. So those details are fantastic.

Samantha: Well, and the inspiration for this book was really, I'm, I live in the Northeast, so in the fall with apple orchards galore and we had gone with my teenage sons and my husband to the apple orchard and I just wanted to get the heck out of there, because I realized, oh my god, there's like these bees and I'm so paranoid with bees. There's bees and there's apple cannon going off in the background and

there's just people crowded trying to get the donuts. And it was just so much going on. And I realized in that moment, like, wow, I don't think anybody probably ever thinks of an apple orchard as a potentially sensory overload place. And that's kind of what started the thinking process for where to pick for *This Beach Is Loud*. I figured, well I probably shouldn't do an apple orchard because I don't know how prevalent they are outside of the Northeast, but I do know that everybody likes to try to get to a beach if they can. And it's something that can be relatable to people throughout the world. And that's where we stumbled upon the beach versus the apple orchard.

Debbie: That's awesome. And I just, you know, the book that you've just finished writing about the birthday party, I mean I, there are, I just imagine there's no shortage of topics that you can cover because it is the little things, right? It's the little unpredictabilities, it's the, there's just so much. So do you have grand plans to keep going with this series?

Samantha: I do. I mean, it's really hard. I have to say because of that it can be really tricky writing a book because there's so much you want to put into it and you have 32 pages, minimal text, which in a way can be harder because every word has such weight and meaning to it that I could be banging my head against the wall for weeks, trying to just get one word right and trying to pare it down enough where there's, it's really hard to just really pare it down and try to get the main concept you want to get out. But while you're writing it, there's all these things coming in to play where we could talk about this and this relates and this relates. And as you get started and you write one, then you get an idea for another, get an idea for another. So I do feel like there's just a potential for many to be written and I hope I get the chance to do that because these four have really shown me that it's really going to be hard to run out of ideas. Whereas at the beginning I was worried about will I be able to write a series? And clearly I think four is the minimal.

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. I just think there's so much potential here and I'm curious to know what the feedback has been. How have the books been received?

Samantha: It's been received really well and I have to say the most meaningful parts are the emails that you'll get from a parent that often it will be a parent picking up the book from the library and say 30% of the time the emails would come from a parent that grabbed the book, not knowing that it was a book for kids on the spectrum. And there was one in particular where she said she sat down with her son and started to read the book and her eyes just went wide open and her son looked up at her and just said, mommy, that was me yesterday at the beach. And she just said, I just started pouring my eyes out and we read the book, read it again. And then we were able to have a discussion about what can we do the next time we go to the beach. And she just said, we're so excited to go to the beach again and use this one, two, three tap in hopes. And he's excited because he saw that there's a chance to have fun because he's always wanted to go to the beach. And it was just such a disaster, quote unquote with the way it ended that the book gave both of them a really positive excitement about trying it again.

And it's just those emails that you get where you're like, okay, this is why I do this. You know, there may be days where it's really stressful and I'm worried and am I going to be able to get this book written in a way that I think is going to resonate? And then you get one of these emails in your inbox and it just kind of washes all of that away and you realize, okay, this is why these are out there. And just this email alone is all the juice I need to keep going. And it's been great.

Debbie: Mmm, that's so fantastic. And as you mentioned earlier, so many of the books that exist, they kind of scream out loud, you know, problem or you know, just the way that they're worded or the titles, they don't necessarily feel yummy, you know, and, and cozy and inviting. They feel like, okay, I've got to get this book because this is what my child's OT said we should read together to explain blah, blah, blah. And so that's again, I think why I was so drawn to the work that you're doing. These are just wonderful children's books. And so not only are they giving differently wired kids a chance to see themselves beautifully represented and, and honestly, authentically represented in their experience. So they can feel seen, which they may never see themselves in mainstream books and other media. But you're also sharing this perspective with all audiences.

And you know, I talk about this sometimes, I just feel there's so much potential for young kids, you know, readers of your book at the preschool age to really grow up understanding that there's a variety of ways to move through the world. And so we're not looking at those other kids as being weird or strange, but rather we're understanding, oh, they are experiencing this differently. So I think there's just so much potential for these books to be just part of that bigger conversation because that's what they're doing. They're filling a space. And I'm so again, glad that Dial noticed that and recognized the potential.

Samantha: Right. Thank you. Yeah, and I just, there were just a few key things that I really wanted to make sure that were included in that book. And it goes to say like with raising kids, it can be easy to get into the rut of just pointing out what the child isn't doing correctly. Like in terms of if there's a situation where a learning situation can happen it can be kind of easy to get into a default of going, you can't do that or this isn't the right way to do that or can't do that. And it creates a situation where a child is only told what they're doing wrong and not necessarily clued in on what they've done right. And in these books, especially with *Can I Play Too*, when the teacher is responding to a situation between the child and the friend, she first points out what the child did brilliantly as a positive reinforcement before introducing some subjects where he could improve on or something that he could, a tool he could use to maybe help understand a situation better.

That just that idea of using a little positive of, okay, this, you've done this great or this was so well done and I'm so proud of you. You asked him to play and that's great. And then, okay, here's some things that maybe we can, I can help you with. But that was important for me to instill in the books as well, to give kids a sense of self confidence into going into situations like that where they may feel like a lot of times they just hear the things that they've done wrong.

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. So can you tell us a little bit about your own personal experience too? So you are on the spectrum, you have that perspective as a writer, as an illustrator in creating these books. But I know that, that your journey as a woman on the spectrum and kind of discovering who you are, you grew up when I grew up at a time when things weren't really talked about. So can you just share a little bit about that and how that has kind of informed the work that you're doing?

Samantha: Yeah. Um, well, I was diagnosed initially when I was 19, with just quote unquote mild autism and it stemmed from just a childhood growing up where I really quite honestly was the bullied child. I was teased a lot and bullied a lot to the point where my mom had even questioned moving schools or changing schools when I was in sixth grade. I was always much younger, much younger than my peers in terms of I played with Barbies until I was 16. I was quite obsessed with Barbies and my big teddy bear, I kind of, he was my sidekick that I really was fond of until high school. But I was the awkward kid. Yeah.

So just growing up, I was the awkward kid. I was not really understanding the social cues of my friends, and I could come across as quite blunt and I still remember to this day, eventually my best friend at the time, I remember calling her and just saying, hey, I've called everybody I know on my list and nobody can come over and you're the last person to call. Do you want to come over and play? And at the time I didn't even think that how that could have come across. And I remember my mom stepping me aside and going, you know, that might've not been the best way to ask her to come over and play. But I was just being honest and I didn't think it was bad. I was just telling her. And thankfully she ended up becoming a best friend of mine. So, um, but just awkwardness.

I really kinda, I had a hard time really getting the social cues of the friends around me. And so because of that, my responses could come off as a little bit odd or strange. And we moved around a lot growing up. I probably was in, I'd say nine schools before I even got to high school.

Debbie: Wow.

Samantha: But the advantage is that I used to always watch the kids around me and there was always the popular girls cause I really wanted to be a popular girl. And so I would watch and I'd say, oh Beth, she gets all the response and she talks like this and she has this mannerism and she always wears these kinds of clothes. So when we would move, I would move to that new location and I would try to be Beth and I would talk like her and I would wear her clothes and I'd be good for about two weeks. Then it started slipping, but it got so, and then I got so skilled at it that I can even as an adult now I kind of can read the room and I can adjust. Like I would, I would adjust myself growing up. Like all right, I'm in a group where they don't like to joke so much. So I'm going to tone it down a bit and I'm going to talk in this kind of tone.

And, and you see it pop up now everywhere, that term of chameleon. But it really is perfectly explained, describes how I navigated getting through those years.

Middle school and high school was, I was an expert at doing that. But the downside was that I started to kind of lose sense of who I was and I always felt like the real me was just not a cool person to hang out with. And my self esteem got really low and it took a long time for me to really see that I needed to stop worrying about what other kids thought and see that there's a lot of beauty in who I am and it just needed to find the right people that got me and that I got them. And that there are some amazing relationships out there. I just have to be myself.

Debbie: I'm just wondering, one of the things I hear from a lot of people in my community is that they are just discovering their own neurodivergence later in life. And that is quite a process for them, for many of them. For some people it's a relief, for some people there's some reconciling or just reflecting and maybe healing that they need to or they want to embark upon to kind of make sense of experiences from when they were a child that were really painful and to move past them. And I'm just wondering, because you, you did get a diagnosis when you were 19 and discovered more as you got older. What was that process like for you? Did you, was it a relief for you? Did it help you?

Samantha: Yeah, it was such a relief. Absolutely. And I think as I got older, then the more like specific diagnosis came in terms of the ASPE, the Asperger stuff. And it didn't really come out for a while because the people that are close to me that do also have Asperger's are male and there were certain aspects of the way they looked at the world that I didn't have. And so it became something I just never thought was part of my own wiring. And it wasn't until I had watched a Tony Atwood Ted Talk where he was talking about the difference with girls and boys and he just basically spilled my whole life out to the point where it was immediately shared with my mom and my mom was just like, oh my goodness. Like just everything to a tee, the Barbies, but just everything he talked about was me and I thought, oh, this is really interesting because the parts that I thought made me not part of that community, it was more so because I was female and it didn't really present itself in females the way it does in males.

So right literally minutes after I watched that podcast, I made an appointment with a psychiatrist and got in and got a further, went through the further diagnoses. And it was a relief in the sense that it explained a lot. I mean, I already had the mild autism diagnosis, but just knowing that the years growing up where I felt like something was wrong with me because I really didn't want to hug my parents and I could see it pained them because my sister was quite the opposite and she was the big hugger. And I didn't know why I didn't like hugging and I was, it just really toiled with me because I felt like it was something that was wrong with me. And I think if I had the tools to know that that's just kind of the way I am and it's nothing that's wrong with me, it would have made, it would have taken away a lot of the anxieties I had about myself and the way it made me feel like I was broken. And I think if I had known that then it would have avoided a lot of those years of depression and anxiety that can be really common if you really don't know that some of these things and traits are really just the way you're wired and it's not something that's your fault.

Debbie: Wow. Thank you for sharing that. I think this is something I also hear a lot from listeners is there, there's still so much information I think that needs to be made available regarding girls on the spectrum versus boys. And I know there's been a lot of, you know, movement and progress happening on that front in the past five, 10 years. But I, there's still so much more that needs to be done. Cause I know that many parents have daughters who aren't thriving and believe they're on the spectrum but a lot of people who diagnose are still not able to recognize it because it looks different.

Samantha: Yeah it does look different but you know, and there are some, a lot of similarities at the same time. Like I was an avid collector. I mean my collections were really odd. Like I would collect eraser shavings, which I would spend my days rubbing my eraser on the school chair trying to collect eraser shavings to put in my little containers. And I was like my little inventor side where I liked to create gadgets to try to make my life easier 'cause I was super into like Rube Goldberg kind of situations. And I would like to try to create a device that could give me water in the morning when I woke up and I would try to make things. And I was like, so those parts, I was just a collector. I mean the fact that I grew up in the 80s and I had mason jars that I set aside to collect sweat in case I ever came in contact with Daryl Hall and John Oates.

I have a lot of odd, my parents are gonna roll their eyes when they hear this podcast 'cause they knew that I'd probably bring that up right away. I had a lot of odd collections. Yeah. I never got the sweat. But I had those jars set aside for, god forbid I would ever. But yeah, and then the intense interests. Like I would get, like when I get interested in something, I get interested in something and I will go all out. And so case in point, Daryl Hall and John Oates, I wrote letters to them every week and I had double cassettes of every album because in case I lost one, I would still have one. It was just I lived and breathed Daryl Hall and John Oates and then all of a sudden one day it would be over and then the next passion would hit. And so there's definitely a lot of things I share with a lot of males with Asperger's that present. Um, so yeah.

Debbie: So I just have to ask before we say goodbye, are you, is one of your plans for a Little Senses book or maybe another project going to be aimed more at girls on the spectrum?

Samantha: Yeah. Well the fourth book for Little Senses is about a girl having a couple of friends over for a birthday party. And there's a couple of little subtle like of how she handles a situation in terms of they'll just be like a little moment where she masks her real reaction and just try to mimic the friends around her. And so that was like a subtle change from the way a child would have reacted in one of the earlier books. But doing that has gotten me really excited to potentially explore like a graphic novel or something for teen girls cause doing this book got me really excited to really explore that further and just going in my own life as a teenager. I just thought that that could be a really cool project to try. So that's kind of in the back of my brain brewing.

Debbie: Alright. Well you keep brewing and keep us posted, but I just want to thank you so much for sharing your story and for telling us about your project. I'm so glad that you reached out to me and that you shared your work with me because I really, I can't say it enough. I just really instantly resonated with the work you're doing. And I think it's so important on so many levels. So listeners, I encourage you to check out the Little Senses series. The art is beautiful. They're just really lovely books that we should, you know, have in our libraries and we should gift to people who may not understand who our children are and, and just kind of get them out into the world. So Samantha, before you say goodbye, just tell us where listeners can connect with you.

Samantha: Of course. First of all, it was really an honor to be on here. I just love everything about Tilt Parenting. So thank you. And mummysam.com, m-u-m-m-y sam.com is my main website. And then I do have Instagram and I have an Instagram account that I've just started specifically for Little Senses. So it would be @littlesensesbooks, will be the Instagram account. I'm not on Facebook, so that would be the best way to see a little bit more behind the scenes and updates for upcoming books.

Debbie: Awesome. Well listeners, as always, I will include links to the books and Samantha's social media and website on the show notes page. But for now, Samantha, thank you again for being a guest on the show and sharing your work with us.

Samantha: Thank you so much.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Samantha's website](#)
- *This Beach is Loud (Little Senses)* by Samantha Cotterill
- *Nope. Never. Not for Me! (Little Senses)* by Samantha Cotterill
- *Can I Play Too? (Little Senses)* by Samantha Cotterill
- [Samantha on Instagram @LittleSensesBooks](#)
- [Is Asperger's Syndrome the Next Stage of Evolution?](#) (Tony Attwood video)