

“Do you know how to eat an elephant?”

A CONVERSATION WITH CHANTAL LAFLEUR* ON JENNY

Jenny

Jenny tells the story of a 13-year-old girl who is diagnosed with leukemia. Being a passionate dancer, she summons all her strength to fight the illness and dance again (Ill. 1).

How did you develop Jenny?

Lafleur: At the beginning, we did a lot of research, visited the hospital, met nurses and so on. The more we researched, the more we realised that there was the potential for a series about a girl who refuses to give in to her disease. She has a goal: to dance, and she does everything to achieve her goal. In the series, we follow her arduous process of healing. We see things through her point of view until she returns to school.

What was the biggest challenge for the character Jenny and how did she solve it?

Lafleur: Suddenly, one day, Jenny finds herself completely isolated from her friends, family, school, home etc. When children are diagnosed with cancer they are immediately hospitalised; they do not

return home; they stay in the hospital for a minimum of 2 months, depending on the prescribed treatment. They face many challenges: they lose their hair, they feel isolated. They undergo a battery of treatments. In Jenny’s case, since she is in isolation, she decides to keep a link with people outside via a blog. It helps her to keep contact and it allows her to express how she feels daily.

Individual conclusions and strong imagery

In one episode there is this beautiful phrase: “Do you know how to eat an elephant?” With regard to resilience, I think this is one of the strongest phrases I have ever heard.

Lafleur: Yes, it is a key phrase. In a way, it is like saying that her predicament is so overwhelming that you must just treat it one thing at a time. It is as big as an elephant: you must “eat” it one bite at a time. Each episode has an individual conclusion, a kind of contribution that helps in terms of resilience (Ill. 2).

For example, when she talks about losing her hair she says: “It was like autumn on my head this morning. But now winter has set in. But honestly, I can’t wait for spring to arrive so my hair can bloom again.”

Or when she talks about her boyfriend, who is very sick: “There’s nothing normal about being sick like this at 13. It’s like we were castaways on the ocean. But it’s even less normal to start going out with someone when you’re not even sure you’ll both make it back to dry land.”

And finally, when she finishes her treatment at the hospital, she says: “I’m really proud, I’m really happy, but my treatment is far from over. It’s like I just arrived at a base camp midway up a mountain. And I’ll strain my neck if I even try to look up to the top, because it seems so high. Like Mount Everest high.”



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Ill. 1: Jenny is a 13-year-old passionate dancer who is diagnosed with leukemia



Screenshot from Jenny © Avenida Productions

Ill. 2: “What will we do, Dad?” – “Do you know how to eat an elephant?” Every episode of *Jenny* ends with a metaphor. Here: you must approach a huge predicament one thing at a time

What should children learn from your show?

Lafleur: More than anything else, empathy. We really hope that when children watch the show they could see themselves in Jenny’s shoes and develop empathy. They should feel, through this 13-year-old girl, what it is like to be deathly ill, isolated, lose your hair, etc. For the children watching, it could serve as a guide: you can surmount great difficulties in life if you address them one bit at a time, step by step.

Empathizing with the protagonist’s misery and triumphs

How does the series foster resilience?

Lafleur: The series is told from Jenny’s point of view, so we are “with her” during all stages of her healing. We live with her during her trials and her triumphs.

After the broadcast of each episode, we received several testimonials from

people encouraging Jenny, telling her not to give up, that they were wholeheartedly with her. We also received messages from people who had already experienced cancer and told us how the series reflected the reality and thanked us for being able to visualize the distress and isolation they themselves had experienced. We also received several testimonials from young people telling us how much the series helped them to better understand the scope of cancer and to raise awareness of this kind of ordeal.

Jenny as a model of resilience

Jenny can also be a model of resilience for all young people who have to face a difficult hardship. Her courage in the series helps them to overcome their own difficulties. I would also add that, in my opinion, the series encourages true resilience because the author doesn’t shirk from invoking strong imagery in each episode.

For example, in one of the episodes, the author enlisted the ocean as a setting. Jenny imagines herself adrift on a raft in the middle of the ocean when she is in the hospital, isolated from everything she knows. In another episode, climbing metaphors are used to indicate her rise to healing. This imagery creates a strong resonance with the audience and lends viewers intimacy with the character, to the point where, on social networks, many young people wondered if the young actress playing Jenny was actually stricken with leukemia. ■

**Chantal Lafleur is the producer of the series Jenny and founder of Avenida Productions, Montréal, Canada.*

