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SPOTLIGHT ON Mariko Tamaki and Brooklyn Allen

Expanding the Lumberjanes universe into middle grade novels was a dream assignment for author Mariko Tamaki and illustrator Brooklyn Allen

When Abrams asked Mariko Tamaki to write a four-book middle grade fiction spinoff of the original Lumberjanes comics series, she was excited: "I was very familiar with the comics, it by 'very familiar' we mean 'loquely obsessed,'" the author says. "I love the Lumberjanes world: it's fun, and there are crafts, trees, animals, and friends having adventures together. Plus you've got your mermaids and your magical stuff in there. It's perfection." The first book in the new series, *Lumberjanes: Unicorn Power*, comes out in October.

"I love that these books push against gendered stereotypes, reference activists, and depict scouts fighting for instead of against each other."
— Mariko Tamaki

The Lumberjanes graphic novel series—first published by Boom! Books in 2014—was developed by Grace Ellis, Noelle Stevenson, Shannon Watters, and illustrator Brooklyn Allen, who is now illustrating the novels. The comics take place at "Miss Quinzella Thiswin Penniquiqui Thistle Crumpet's Camp for Hardcore Lady Types" and star the five distinctive campers of Roanoke cabin: April, Jo, Mal, Molly, and Ripley.

One of the draws of the comics series is its focus on unquestionably resilient, curious, and intrepid female-identifying characters, which have not always been easy to find in children's and YA literature. Tamaki sought out relatable girl characters in books she read as a kid. However, Tamaki says, "I don't remember ever reading an adventure- or action-oriented series with girls."

The Lumberjanes middle grade novels are meant as an expansion of the series rather than a reboot: "I am creating new stories with the existing series as my reference, inspiration, and jumping-off point," illustrating novels. "Mariko's text became such a challenge—I wanted to draw it all—but I had to compromise with myself by illustrating only the chapter headings," Allen says. Even after all this time illustrating the Lumberjanes, Allen enjoys the process: "I'm still figuring out better ways to draw the Lumberjanes and their world."

The Lumberjanes, with their humor and supernatural menagerie, might seem like a departure from Tamaki's previous projects, which include the graphic novels *This One Summer* and *Skim* (both illustrated by Tamaki's cousin Jillian Tamaki). Those books deal with girls coming of age and forming sexual identities. But, though the Lumberjanes series is certainly fun and magical, Tamaki has long admired its commitment to presenting complex characters and situations: "I love that these books push against gendered stereotypes, reference activists, and depict scouts fighting for instead of against each other," Tamaki says. "I feel really political writing these books, for sure, and talking to the kids who love them feels like the best kind of activism." She also hopes that readers are inspired to look up the frequent references to famous female figures.

The series resonates now more than ever for Allen: "The world of the Lumberjanes extends the magic of friendship and adventure to everyone, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or race," Allen says. "There's something powerful and enchanting about navigating, exploring, and communing with the wilderness, and for much of history—across many mediums—stories about that have been made by and for cisgendered, heterosexual, white men."

What comes next for the Lumberjanes? Tamaki isn't giving anything away, though she adds, "We leave a little bread crumb at the end of every book" that gives readers a clue about the nature of the next adventure. "Suffice to say, I've been reading a lot about stars these days."

