Ep. 121 | Looking Back: Author Interviews

Kendra Hello, my name is Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. You can find a complete transcript of this episode over on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. Or you can just check your show notes.

Kendra Hello, friends. Today is the first of two retrospective episodes to end off Reading Women's series on air. And so the last episode will be our episode retrospective, which will go up on December 15th. In the meantime, we will have a lot of different author interviews that Joce and I have done. And . . . so very excited to share those with you. But today we're actually going to be taking a look back at past episodes. So you will notice that the episodes are varying quality, you might say. And so I thought I would talk a little bit about how our author interviews came to be because if you've been here from the beginning, you may remember that our podcast was every other week for a long time. And then. . . . For our first season, we just had those. And then we went to author interviews occasionally in 2017 and 2018. And I think around 2019 is when we became an every-week podcast with author interviews when we didn't have our main episodes. So how did . . . how did we get there? So we're going to talk about that today. We're going to talk about some of our different interviews that stood out for various reasons.

Kendra But I want to say a huge thank you to all of the authors who have come on the podcast over the years. I am always just blown away by the women who have come on the podcast and talked about books, whether that be guests on a regular episode or author interviews. I am just so grateful for everyone who has put in the work and the effort into making Reading Women what it is.

Kendra But we were early on in our 2017 season. And for our second interview, we booked an unknown author with a book with a very small publicity budget called PACHINKO. And we booked Min Jin Lee to come on the podcast. And I am so, so grateful for Min Jin Lee for coming on the podcast because at the end of the interview, after we stopped recording, she said, "Thank you for having me on your podcast. You know, podcasts like yours are tastemakers, and you really make a difference." And, you know, at the time, we were very small. And the fact that she said that—she took the time to thank us and was just so gracious—it meant the world to us tiny podcasters who just had started this as a fun hobby to, you know, have something to do together as friends. And we never forgot that. And we love her and her work. And I am so excited for her next book. I'm not sure if it's still titled AMERICAN HAGWON, but I hope . . . I am excited to listen to it.

[**Kendra** But I wanted to feature an excerpt from this interview because (1.) you can hear the audio changes. Again, I am so sorry about the various audio qualities of these interviews. But also (2.) we talk about the first line of the book PACHINKO and what it, you know, what it meant to Min Jin Lee writing it and, like, the thought process behind her writing it. And it was just a beautiful moment. And I remember that interview, as one of our early interviews, so distinctly because it informs so much of what we did later. And I don't know if Min Jin Lee is listening at all, but I just want to say thank you for your support so early on. And while Min Jin Lee's book, PACHINKO, did not have much of a marketing budget when it first came out, it did go on to become a finalist for the National Book Award. And Min Jin Lee, at least in bookish circles, became a household name. And she is absolutely wonderful. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. And our first question to Min Jin Lee was about the first line of her novel, “History has failed us, but no matter.” And we

asked about the origins of that epic irst line. So here is a little snippet from our conversation with Min Jin Lee.

Min Jin Lee Oh, well, I really like this question because the sentence sort of came to my brain fully formed. And as you can tell, I'm forty-eight. I've produced two whole books. So, clearly, writing does not come easily to me. So whenever a sentence comes to me fully formed, I'm so grateful. And it essentially is the thesis of my book, which is that I believe that the history is almost like a character. And it informs each one of us, and it affects each one of us. And lately, you know, I think as Americans, we can feel like, "Oh, has history supported us or failed us?" And I think it's something that people have to sort of think about in terms of the political context in which we live. So I write about Koreans. My first book was about Koreans at America. My second book is about Koreans in Japan. And the history of Koreans in the past nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a really tragic one in many ways, at least in the history books. However, when I spoke to the Koreans in Japan, they didn't feel that they were limited just by history. They felt like they were adapting around it. And I found that their resilience and their surviving skills to be so impressive that I actually had to revise an entire manuscript and write the current book, which really focuses on one family's response to the history of their nation and their community.

Min Jin Lee Yeah. And it's funny because I think most of the times we think of history as being something really dry or boring. But I guess for me, what I realized is that history is constantly affecting us. Like, for example, like, yesterday, the South Korean president was impeached. So the first woman president that Korea ever had—South Korea ever had—was impeached yesterday. And now that she doesn't have immunity affecting her, she is going to face prosecution charges of bribery. And she'll probably be put in jail. And I'm only mentioning this because for me, as a novelist, that part is kind of like, yes, history happened. However, I'm more interested in the fact that two people actually died during the protest yesterday. They actually were protesting on her behalf and supporting her. And they just passed out because it was too exciting for them. And for me, I'm not. . . . I think that the leaders of history are interesting, and there's a lot of airtime given to them. I'm more interested in people like you and me and our responses to what happens every single day and what makes us act or not act on and also what our central concerns are on a day-to-day basis, which are not necessarily headlines.

Kendra Oh my goodness. Isn't Min Jin Lee just fabulous? I love listening to that interview. And you can go listen to the full interview via the link in our show notes. We've also gone back. And our older interviews that I mentioned today that didn't have transcripts, we've gone back and added transcripts for those or are currently in the process of adding those transcripts because I wanted to make sure those were available as well.

Kendra So in 2018, we went to a panel with Leesa Cross-Smith. And she is an author where her debut came out from Hub City Press. Now, Hub City Press is a personal favorite of mine, as I lived about thirty to forty minutes south of them for several years. And I love their work, especially as an Appalachian person. Seeing a Appalachian press, seeing a southern press do such great work is incredibly important to me. And so I really love that this book. . . . I love the press it comes from. And Leesa Cross-Smith is just a wonderful person to chat with. On panels, she just shines as, like, this star, this vivacious person with so much to say and such great storytelling chops. Loved her book WHISKEY AND RIBBONS. And I will say, as someone who came from a literary background, I was skeptical of romance. I admit it. I admit it. I was. I was wrong. I will say it here; I was completely wrong. And this is one of the books that convinced me just to get over myself.

Kendra So in this interview, we are talking to Leesa Cross-Smith about WHISKEY AND RIBBONS, her debut, which is set in contemporary Louisville, which is in western Kentucky. Now my family is from southeast Ohio, northeast and eastern Kentucky. So, you know, it's a similar state. Southern, but it's kind of a different vibe, which is fine. But I really appreciated this book because it featured southern characters in such a beautiful way. And as in the excerpt you're about to listen to, Leesa Cross-Smith talks about the importance for her of representing Black people in the South. Black Kentuckians who are there in Louisville doing the thing and that how that representation was really important to her. And I really appreciate her voice on this, and she's continued to do that throughout the rest of her books. She now has two other titles out from Grand Central Publishing. And so she's just done so well. And I love her brand of, as she says, literary romance. I have become a huge fan of her work. And I will say the audio of WHISKEY AND RIBBONS is nigh near perfection. And so I cannot recommend this book enough. And I love listening back to this interview because it just reminded me of the wealth that is Appalachian literature, that is southern literature, that is all of these things and the great work that is coming out of, you know, "regional areas," of the United States. And I'm just so grateful. I'm so grateful for authors, like Leesa Cross-Smith, who spent the time talking to about their work and wanting to see their regions represented in literature. So here is our conversation with Leesa Cross-Smith.

Kendra You're published with Hub City Writers, which is just north of me. And it was so exciting to see a local indie press and have a book there and to connect with. So how did you find out about Hub City Writers? And how did you get WHISKEY AND RIBBONS published with them?

Leesa Cross-Smith Yeah, it was really, really a dream come true to be published by a press that loves, publishes, and is—you know—so, so in love with the South. So I would say that they just love the South. They love southern fiction. That's what they're doing. Like, they're not at all trying to get around that. They're not trying to do that in a sneaky way. Like, they're very straightforward. Like, we are publishing southern fiction, and we are looking for southern fiction. And since I love that. . . . I mean, I just love the South. My family's from Alabama. We're from Kentucky. And so . . . so that was really important to me that . . . that I could connect with a publisher that . . . that was interested in southern fiction, but not interested in the grotesque or not interested in just using the South as a joke, which is so often done. Yeah, I actually don't know. I think the connection there was a writer friend of mine—that I've connected with online—I think I had posted one of my short stories. Meg Reid, who is now the director of Hub City—she was not at the time, but she soon . . . soon after bought my book. And she became the director. Yeah, I think that she read one of my short stories. I believe that she reached out to both me and my agent around the same time, and it kind of went pretty quickly from there. But it was definitely because Meg had read my shorter work, I do believe.

Leesa Cross-Smith I mean, someone actually said to me, "I never really thought about Black people living in Kentucky." You know? That's just wild. It's wild to me, you know, because—of course, I've lived here my whole life—but it's wild to me that some people, yeah, when you say "Kentucky," they just see one thing. If you say "Tennessee," they just picture one thing. Or Mississippi or, you know, any of those states. They just are picturing one thing. It's really kind of hard for them to picture, oh, people are just living there, hanging out. We got Target, Starbucks. . . . I don't think that they see it like that. So it's pretty. . . . It is pretty wild to have to sort of start there when I talk to people. Like, "I'm from Kentucky. And we have water. And it tastes really good." To have to start there, it's just . . . it's kind of mind blowing.

Kendra So now we've had an interview with Min Jin Lee from 2017, an interview with Leesa Cross-Smith from 2018, and now we're going to fast forward to 2019 to our chat with our Reading Women Award for Fiction winner from that year, Carolina De Robertis, who wrote CANTORAS. I remember we just couldn't stop gushing about it. And I remember reading it. I was just so devastated by how wonderful it was in that best way possible kind of way. And talking with Carolina, she was just so generous, so kind and gracious, and just a wonderful person to talk to. And so during our conversation, I asked her about queer history and how oftentimes our history of queer communities is very American centric, but there are queer movements happening all around the world. And she had so many wonderful things to say about that, which I've included here.

Kendra And when I was reading this book, I forget what it is that it's mentioned, but you're reading along in the story, and you're engrossed. And all of a sudden, they mention Stonewall. And I think when we think about LGBTQ+ history, we think about America, and we're very American-centric. Especially here. But in reality, there are queer histories all over the world that we don't really think about or know about. Was that something that you wanted to push back against when you were writing this story?

Carolina De Robertis Yes, that is absolutely something I wanted to, if not push back against, at least kind of pry open a little, expand, and explore. Because if you look at Uruguay, for example, you know, the dictatorship began in the early '70s. People were bell bottomed and dreaming of revolution in parallel ways to Europe and the United States. But then it was almost as if a curtain fell. You know, there was no internet. There was an incredibly intense amount of control over what was in newspapers and television and what came in from outside the country. So people inside Uruguay were almost in like sort of a mental prison in terms of not hearing about movements going on in other countries at all. So late '70s, early '80s here in the United States, people already knew about Stonewall. There was the Black Power movement and feminist consciousness raising. And gay rights was, you know, was an explosively powerful movement in that time. And Uruguay not only didn't have that, but didn't even have access to knowing that it had happened. And that's an important story too because Uruguay went from being such a closed country in those ways to becoming the second country in Latin America to legalize gay marriage in 2013 and to do it before the United States! Right? So I'm also wanting to push back against this idea that we Latin Americans are more backwards, right? And that the only way that we'll get something like a gay rights movement is by importing it from somewhere else. That's also a flattening of the story. That said, I do think that gay rights has always thrived on international exchange. So hearing about Stonewall in other countries has been really meaningful to movements and queer people on the ground. And I know that the legalization of gay marriage in Uruguay was, in part, very much fueled by watching what was happening in the US and other countries and drawing inspiration from the activists in other places. So that international cross-fertilization I wanted to also portray.

Kendra So after CANTORAS wins the Reading Women Award for Fiction at the end of 2019, we turn the corner and head right into the pandemic. Now this changed the way that I booked interviews in that I looked for books that might not be getting the attention that they would have otherwise with no longer doing in-person events. But I will say it also made my ability to record with folks a lot easier because people were more used to doing things virtually as the year continued.

Kendra But the next interview today that I want to share with you is one that is incredibly personal to me. As many of you know, I have a disabling chronic illness. I'm a disabled person, and my condition deteriorates over time. And so having started this podcast and started planning this podcast when I was twenty-five years old, I've watched my condition progress over the course of time. And so as the ableist language greatly increased during the . . . particularly during the beginning of the pandemic when people were talking about resources and who was going to get what resources, and disabled people not being considered a high priority for life saving resources, it was incredibly devastating. And personally, I . . . I did not know what to do. I did not know how to move forward. And every day was just a new challenge.

Kendra One of the great shining lights of that year was my conversation with Alice Wong, who is a disability rights advocate and activist and also the founder of the Disability Visibility Project. And the thirtieth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act happened in 2020. And so she had a anthology coming out called DISABILITY VISIBILITY. And as soon as I heard about it, I knew I wanted to talk to her. And Alice Wong has a podcast herself. And so I was so thrilled to be able to talk to her. But also, I've never felt seen as a disabled person than I did in that conversation. Alice Wong is such an incredible advocate for the disability community. And she mentions later in the interview that she wanted to include disabled people at every step of the way for this project. And I greatly appreciated that. I'll quit gushing as I am want to do. But here is my conversation with Alice Wong.

Kendra The first question I had for you today is about . . . about the book. So the title of the book, DISABILITY VISIBILITY, shares a name with your Disability Visibility Project, which you founded. So what is that project and how did it come to be?

Alice Wong Thank you for asking. So the Disability Visibility Project started in 2014. You know, it's interesting that this—the timing of our conversation—because we're about to approach the thirtieth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act this July. And I started the project actually as a one-year, oral history campaign to record stories by disabled people to lead up to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ADA in 2015, July 26. So at that time, I think there were a lot of disability organizations getting ready to celebrate and do something to mark this occasion. And I was just, you know, one person. And I just wondered to myself, like, what could I do? What's my contribution? And, you know, one thing that's always bothered me is that . . . number one, we don't see enough stories about disabled people by disabled people. And also, I don't think there's enough disability history that is known to the general public. And I really wanted to have an effort to do think about disability history now, not just way back when. You know, and I think all of us are creating history every day. It's not just about these iconic figures or super famous people or big accomplishments. So I formed a partnership with StoryCorps, which is an oral history nonprofit. And I just started interviewing amazing friends of ours, you know, people that I thought are super cool and just wanted a chance to share a story with them. And I began to use social media, and I just encouraged people all over, and it kind of snowballed.

[**Alice Wong** So I started in 2014, this project. It was just going to be a one year, you know, collecting stories. And it really resonated. People, I think, have a hunger to tell their own stories. And StoryCorps has a relationship with the Library of Congress. So each participant has the option to archive their story at the Library of Congress. So that's really exciting too, not just that we're telling our stories, but we're creating a body of work that's going to be there forever for future generations and that could be accessed by the public. So as of 2020, we have approximately a little bit over 140 oral histories. And in addition to

oral histories, we are an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability culture . . . through a podcast, through blog posts, Twitter chats, you know, all kinds of ways.

Kendra Oh, that's really fabulous. And, you know, I really love the title of DISIBILITY VISIBILITY because, you know—like you say in the very first paragraph of your introduction—that you don't realize what's missing because you don't see it. And you don't even realize that you're thirsting for your own types of stories until you . . . until you read them. And that's something that I definitely felt when reading this collection. And I felt seen in a lot of ways that I had really never read essays like these before, and it just made me realize about how much that was something that I needed to see. And I really love that the idea that there's even more oral histories from from your Disability Visibility Project as well.

Alice Wong Thank you for that. And I feel my job, in itself, is not always. . . . It doesn't mean there has to be a mirror image. I think some people feel like being seen means a literal, exact shade of representation. I feel like that's partially true. But I also think that being seen is also about this type of similar lived experience. I think people with disabilities, they range in such different types. You know, there's such diversity in the types of disability, just the ways people live. But I think some things, you know, there's a lot of commonality in terms of just the, you know, living with a different way of being and how that really does challenge the status quo. And I really do hope that, all types of people with disabilities, whether they have invisible disabilities or, you know, all kinds that are just, you know. But then they read somebody that's in the book that with or without their exact, same diagnosis or same kind of disability. . . . I hope they do find something there for them.

Kendra So at the end of 2020, Joce started joining me for interviews. Of course, she would later go on and do a lot of interviews on her own in 2021. But one of our last interviews together was talking to Talia Hibbert, who is the author of GET A LIFE, CHLOE BROWN, and TAKE A HINT, DANI BROWN, and the book that we talk about the most in this interview is ACT YOUR AGE, EVE BROWN, which features two autistic characters who fall in love. Being a neurodivergent person herself, Joce was very excited to talk to Talia Hibbert about her autistic characters. Talia Hibbert is an autistic Black writer who has an incredible range of neurodivergent characters across the board in her novels. And so I loved listening to her talk about that. One of the things that Joce and Talia talk about in this interview is for Eve, what it's like being an autistic Black woman in the UK and how she was never diagnosed as a child. She's an adult. She's trying to figure things out versus her love interest, who is an autistic white man who was diagnosed when he was younger. And so there's different dynamics there. And Talia Hibbert wanted to illustrate that both types of ways of figuring out things for yourself or being diagnosed early are valid. And she talks about that in this interview. I just think about this interview so much, honestly, not just because I love Talia Hibbert, but because Joce and Talia have this great rapport. And it's such a wonderful conversation. So here is Joce and Talia talking about ACT YOUR AGE, EVE BROWN.

Joce So let's transition into talking about your third book in the Brown Sisters series, ACT YOUR AGE, EVE BROWN. And if you guys did not know, EVE BROWN is so special to me because it features two autistic characters. I want to ask you, what was your approach to writing these two characters and the development of their relationship, I guess, compared to maybe how you would write a neurotypical or allistic character arc or relationship arc?

Talia Hibbert Well, one reason why I was really excited to write two autistic characters in a romance is that I myself am autistic. And in my experience, a lot of the deeper, more enduring or easier relationships I have are with other autistic people. I feel that we tend to gravitate towards each other and kind of be a safe haven in a social world where we're not always accepted or we don't always feel comfortable. And I think that's something really lovely that happens in real life. So I was excited to reflect it in a book. And it was also really important to me that I have the opportunity to show that autistic people aren't the same because we're autistic and don't all fit into the typical stereotypes that mainstream media clings to a lot. So that was fun, you know, to show that not only that Eve and Jacob, two autistic characters, are individual people, but that because of that, they experience their autism in such wildly different ways. And, you know, there's countless other ways to experience it as well.

Talia Hibbert And as we're kind of crafting their relationship arc, I really enjoyed the idea of them being so different that initially they just can't stand each other. And that's always fun to write in a romance. So it was one of my favorite tropes. It's tricky, but it's fun. But then at the same time, I wanted to show from the moment they met that kind of instinctive understanding in certain aspects, even when they didn't understand each other in other ways. So it was kind of a fine balance, and it was a lot of fun walking that tightrope.

Joce Yeah, I think one of my favorite things about ACT YOUR AGE, EVE BROWN is. . . . Oh my gosh, this is a mild tangent. But I saw this graphic on Twitter that was like, "If you're a Pisces, your romance trope is sunshine and grump." And I was like, "It has my favorite romance trope too." And I think it's so cool, you know, that we can write neurodivergent or autistic characters—I personally identify as neurodivergent—while also kind of incorporating these tropes that typically we only see neurotypical or allistic characters put in. So I really just want to point that out. And also this one scene in EVE BROWN that seemed really, really pivotal to me and my own personal journey into, you know, exploring my own neurodivergence. . . . It's when Eve is looking on the internet for diagnostic criteria for an autism diagnosis to see if the criteria match her traits. And why was this scene particularly important for you to include?

Talia Hibbert I think that, you know, there are so many different ways that people learn about themselves and come to realize that they are autistic. And especially when you get into other marginalizations—for example, Eve being a Black woman—you know, for a long time, they didn't think that anyone other than men could be autistic because they just don't know how to spot neurodivergent traits in people who aren't, you know, of the demographic that they prioritize. And at the same time, you know, Black children are also under diagnosed or completely missed for similar reasons. And so, you know, living at the intersection of those identities, a lot of Black women or people of marginalized genders just don't ever get diagnosed and don't get the support that they need and often find themselves thinking that there's something wrong with them and not understanding why they can't do the things that other people can do. So I really wanted to show that some people always know or are caught early, but other people really have to figure it out for themselves and do the DIY thing, you know? And also that people feel different ways about needing or not needing a diagnosis. And finally, that you don't have to kind of tick every perceived box and meet some imaginary standard of what it means to be neurodivergent. And so just all those differences in the experience, I felt like Eve exploring in her own way, really kind of summed that up.

Kendra So our next clip is from later that year. And Sachi talked to Elizabeth Miki Brina about her memoir SPEAK, OKINAWA, which premiered during Asian American Pacific

Islander Heritage Month. And like Sachi says in the introduction to that interview, she'd never really read a book that she so deeply connected to because it reflected a lot of her own personal experience. Elizabeth's mom is from Okinawa, and her dad is a white American man who was in the military. And that's how he met her mother. And Sachi has a similar experience where her mom is from Japan, and her dad is a white American man who was in the military. And that's how he met her mom. And so they talk about that shared experience, and it's such a beautiful interview. And they have this frank discussion about what it feels like for them to be in their shoes. So here is a moment from their conversation where they talk about that.

Sachi One of the first questions that came to my mind when I knew we were sitting down today is that so much of your book is centered around your parents, especially your relationship with your mother. And so as I was reading this book, you can definitely see that distinct shift between the relationships and perceptions you had about your mother and father in the adult passages versus the childhood passages. There's this contrast and this difference. What I'm curious about is how kind of those shifts took place because your book really shows the goalposts of then and now rather than, you know, the journey of maybe how you got there. And I think each and every one of us—in my mind, the biracial community—has this push and pull constantly, right? Of not feeling 100 percent, you know, one part or the other. The only thing, at least for me that feels 100 percent is that I'm 100 percent biracial. And my even relationships with my family and especially my parents have changed and shifted over time. And I think that is so indicative of that biracial experience. So how did that kind of journey and maybe some shifts and turning points look like for you?

Elizabeth Miki Brina Mm hmm. It's still something I'm constantly grappling with. And I'm still coming to new insights, even after, like, pouring it all out into this book. But like I said before, I grew up in this white suburb. And I constantly looked to my father. Like, my father was the one who could guide me. My father was the one who could teach me the way to be in this world. And my mother just seemed. . . . You know, this is coming from a child's standpoint.

Sachi Right, yeah.

Elizabeth Miki Brina Like, why can't you show me anything, right? Like, why is it so difficult for you to navigate this world? And so I, you know, I thought of her as weak, as someone who couldn't take care of me. But she was, you know, she was constantly taking care of me in ways that I couldn't see until. . . .

Sachi Until you're older!

Elizabeth Miki Brina Yeah, exactly. And then you look back. And you're like, oh my goodness. Wow. How did . . . how did you do all that without any recognition for it?

Sachi Yeah.

Elizabeth Miki Brina And yet she still kept going. And that's . . . and that's why I just admire her strength so much. And it was a lot of just growing up and and seeing the dynamics, also the gender dynamics as well, understanding the more nuance of these systems. Right? Colonialism, imperialism, racism . . . and seeing how that put my father . . . and her . . . and how she was just living in this family where her culture was not dominant. And so that gave me much more like a sympathetic, generous view of . . . of

what she had had to deal with, how much harder it was for her than my father. And becoming a woman and being like, wow, like being a woman is really hard. And seeing her in that way, just as not as my mother, but as a woman who is dealing with all the misogyny. I mean, that's a system that came into play as well to being a . . . being a cocktail waitress, you know, at a nightclub in Okinawa and serving these soldiers drinks. And that was one of the . . . one of the things she told me later in life, how she got paid a dollar for every drink she got a serviceman to buy for her. Just the dynamics of that.

Sachi Yeah, right?

Elizabeth Miki Brina You know, using her sexuality, right? Using her, just objectifying, having to objectify herself to make a living. And yeah. And so just understanding how all that was sort of coming together in my family and manifesting in the dynamics of my family. And it really . . . that's what it is. It's just the. . . . You talk about turning points. But that's what was so hard to capture because it happened so subtly and so gradually and over time. One of them was definitely seeing my mother as. . . . The inspiration for the book was going to my mother's baptism. And she had recently joined the Rochester Japanese Christian congregation. And it's a church that's . . . all the members are Japanese. And almost all of them are women. Like, I think there's like two Japanese men there. And almost all of them are women. Almost all of them are around my mother's age. And all the women around my mother's age were married to white American men who served in the military. And that was the first time it kind of dawned on me like, this is not . . . I'm not a totally isolated incident. My family. . . .

Sachi Yeah, no! I had the same experience when . . . when my. . . . So my dad was chief in the Navy. And every year, they would have an annual Navy award ceremony for all the chiefs and officers. And you would . . . they would bring their family members. And so my parents would go to the ceremony. And then they'd have this party at the end. All the kids would come down, and they had dance floor and all this stuff. I walked into this conference room, this ballroom, and almost—definitely more than half—but like a shockingly large amount that even me as a child realized that almost every one of those Navy soldiers were married to Asian women.

Sachi And you know, as a kid, you're just like, "Oh, wow, everyone's got an Asian mom like me." And now, as an adult, I say, "Wow, like that is a distinct pattern that arises from, you know, a lot of different factors"—that you lay out very well in one of the chapters of this book, that I have it in a later question. We could definitely talk about that as well. It is this shared experience, and it does play to a lot of these different aspects of our history and our cultures. And it's no surprise, either. I think my dad. . . . My parents are no longer together. After they split, my dad noted that a lot of people who he knows in the Navy that married these women from overseas, they're not together anymore. And I think that's telling. And it just makes me realize a lot of different things about my family and then a lot of the military families that we had because I grew up on Navy bases for most of my life, that it is this kind of systemic-type cycle that we live in. And it's something that isn't really talked about a lot. And I felt very. . . . It's kind of like whenever you're on the base and you're isolated to it, you feel like it's so normalized. And then when my dad got out of the military, when I was in middle school, and we moved back to a very predominately white suburb—like you had mentioned. . . . We're in Ohio, but.

Elizabeth Miki Brina Close enough.

Sachi Exactly right? You know, apples and oranges. Right? I realized that that is not the norm. And that's not really discussed. And my family was very different than all of the other families around me. So I totally, totally get and understand that as well.

Kendra So our last clip is a more recent interview. And that's Joce's interview with the Zakiya Dalila Harris. And in this interview, they discuss Zakiya's novel THE OTHER BLACK GIRL, which is about a young Black woman who works in publishing at a mostly white office and how that experience is like for her. Zakiya also worked in publishing. And she was the only Black person that worked in her office. And she imbues her characters with a lot of her experiences. And Joce and Zakiya talk about that how Zakiya's experiences inform the characters, but also some of the things that she wanted to also add. And Joce is such a great interviewer in that she is such a fun person to talk to and to listen to. And she has a great time with the guests. But she also delves into the meat of the books. And no matter what genre she's working with, no matter what kind of book that she's working with, she's able to do that. And Zakiya is so generous and sharing her experience writing this book and the things that she wanted to communicate. I really enjoyed listening to this interview again. And here is part of Joce's conversation with Zakiya Dalila Harris.

Joce Speaking of which, kind of just in the writing process, how did you navigate—I guess—that super meta aspect of, I guess, first working in publishing, now being a writer being published and then writing about working in publishing? How does that work for you?

Zakiya Dalila Harris It is. It is. . . . It's so weird. Like it's all just so weird thinking about how meta it really is. Because, I mean, I had written this book before the year we had last year too. And then when all of the things were happening of me trying to figure out how I was going to edit my book during a world . . . the world just combusting, watching the news, of course, seeing what happened to Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and then trying to be creative. It reminded me a lot of Nella trying to process the news, the police shootings, and then go to work and show up with a smile. And it was really interesting to navigate that and then have conversations about that. But I'm hoping it's ultimately helpful for me processing all of it. And I also have a therapist, I should say, now. So really figuring that out, too, because I'm not used to being a public person. That was not part of my plan necessarily, although I guess that is what comes from being an author. But it's not something I'd thought about as much. And now that I'm on the other side, it is something I'm mindful of and want to make sure that I am taking care of myself, you know what I mean?

Joce Absolutely. And I feel like we see this a lot in the book with Nella. You know, there's this frustration underneath maybe the entire thing where she's trying to show up and be the editorial assistant to Vera and all the authors there and being amenable and agreeable while also trying to make radical change in her workplace. And it really feels like such an uphill battle being a Black editorial assistant in mostly white space. And that frustration is so palpable. What are a few defining moments in the book that kind of encapsulate this for you?

Zakiya Dalila Harris Ooh, I mean, the one with—I won't give away too many spoilers—but the scene with Colin.

Joce Oh yes, Colin.

Zakiya Dalila Harris In which, for listeners, I'll just say Nella has to navigate—and this happens pretty early on—Nella has to navigate a very uncomfortable conversation with one of her white authors who has written a Black character that for Nella does not ring true. And she has to figure out how to tell them. And her boss. . . . And I should say also, this author is a best-selling, keeps-the-lights-on author at the place where she works. So there are all of these stakes of her having to navigate that and feeling like she doesn't want to come off as the angry Black woman, the Black woman who's too sensitive, but then also wants to keep her integrity intact and doesn't want to be that Black person that Twitter is decrying for letting this slip by. So . . . so that's one moment. And yeah, I mean, a couple other instances happen throughout the book that are not as blatant, that are more subtle microaggressions of having her name being gotten wrong or of being mistaken for someone else. All of those things I feel like are these kind of little microaggressions that actually build up and cause so much frustration in her trying to just be, be good at her job, but also wanting to speak up. And there's just a lot to balance there.

Kendra Well, that brings us back to the present. I hope you have enjoyed going back through time and walking through these different interviews with me. There have been so many wonderful authors that we've talked to who've been so generous with their time. And I hope you have enjoyed listening to those interviews as much as we have enjoyed doing them. I'm so grateful for these conversations and for these books that are out in the world, for these women writers who are doing such wonderful things in literature. So please tell us your favorite interviews. And. . . . I would love to hear about them. You can find us in all the places, of course. But yeah. It's . . . it's been. . . . It's been so wonderful. So at the time of this recording, we still have a few author interviews to record and to publish. So those will be coming out soon.

Kendra All right, so that's our show. And many thanks to our wonderful, wonderful patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester. Our music is by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you all so, so much for listening.