

Ep. 86.5 | Rust Belt Women with Authors Raechel Anne Jolie & Eliese Colette Goldbach

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And today is episode 86.5, which is a special episode for the fifth Wednesday of this month. You can find a complete transcript and a list of all the books mentioned today linked in our show notes. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:37] **Kendra** Now, as many of you all know . . . though I live in South Carolina, I am an Ohioan. And when I moved down here, people would ask me, "Oh, where are you from?" And I would say, "Ohio." And then they would say, "Oh! Cleveland?" And I had to let them down. No, I'm indeed not from the most famous city in the state. I am from the opposite end.

[00:01:01] **Kendra** But recently I've been thinking about my native state and how I rarely see it in books. And when I do, it's typically in a book about road trips. And the people who are in the car are incredibly bored by the gray landscape and cannot wait to get out of the state of Ohio. And this has been really disheartening to me over the years because I have to agree with native Ohioan Toni Morrison when she writes in *BELOVED*, "In Ohio, seasons are theatrical. Each one enters like a prima donna, convinced its performance is the reason the world has people in it." To me and to other Ohioans, Ohio is beautiful. And it has so much rich culture and heritage. And that also got me thinking about the Midwest in general and the heartland and the western United States. How oftentimes in our conversations about the United States, they're often referred to as flyover states or flyover country, which is a really derogatory term when you think about it. So over the course of the next year or so, I would like to do some special episodes featuring these areas of the United States that are often overlooked or not seen for the glorious states that they are. So today we are going to be looking at the Midwest, specifically Cleveland.

[00:02:27] **Kendra** So later in the show, I'll be talking to Eliese Colette Goldbach, whose memoir *RUST* recently came out from Flatiron. In her memoir, Eliese talks about what it was like for her to work in the steel mill, which Cleveland is famous for. She talks about what it was like to go from being in grad school and academia to working a "blue collar" job and what it was like to be in that kind of very different environment than what she was used to and what it was like being a woman in a very masculine field, you might say.

[00:02:59] **Kendra** But first up, I'm going to be talking to Raechel Anne Jolie, whose memoir *RUST BELT FEMME* recently came out from Belt Publishing, which is an indie press based in Cleveland. And her memoir tells a story of her life growing up as a working class woman in Cleveland and how that got her where she is today as a woman with several degrees, including a PhD. And she now lives in Minneapolis with her partner.

[00:03:25] **Kendra** I couldn't have been more honored and thrilled to be able to talk to these women today. And to round out the show, at the end, I'm going to be talking to our very own Sachi Argabright, who grew up and currently lives in the Cleveland area. So if you're from Cleveland, I hope you enjoy your special episode today, where we're celebrating all things Cleveland. But if you're like me and not from the area, I hope you enjoy learning more about it. So let's get the show on the road. So first up is my conversation with Raechel Anne Jolie, the author of *RUST BELT FEMME*.

[00:04:03] **Kendra** Well, Raechel, I'm so excited to have you on the podcast today to talk all about Cleveland.

[00:04:09] **Raechel** Thank you. Me too.

[00:04:11] **Kendra** So I thought we would start with a little bit of broader ideas about the Midwest since a lot of people aren't from there and aren't very familiar. What are some, I guess, maybe some misconceptions or assumptions about the Midwest or the Rust Belt that people might have, for those who weren't familiar with the region?

[00:04:30] **Raechel** I think the biggest misconception is that there is one monolithic culture or sort of identity or predisposition that the Midwest has that makes us, you know, sort of monolithically distinct from other regions. And I think that's where I want to start because even though I . . . and I will . . . sort of mention some things that may be distinct from other parts of the region in some aspects, I think it's first important to start by saying you will find the same kind of diversity in the Midwest that you would on the coasts. You will find very smart people in the Midwest in the same way that you would on, sort of, the coasts.

[00:05:05] **Raechel** And for people outside of the US, there is this sort of like regionalism of like, oh, the coasts are where smart, cool people are. And the Midwest is where this just like mass of corn farmers live. And so that, I think is like the first place to start is that there is so much rich cultural, um, cultural diversity, racial and class . . . you know, all the kind of diversity that exists in the Midwest. But in terms of those stereotypes, yeah, I think there's this assumption that everybody's a farmer, that nobody's educated, and that we are the region that caused Trump, which is, you know, not true. So those are big misconceptions that feel important right away to sort of name.

[00:05:49] **Kendra** Yeah. I think the Midwest, like Appalachia, got a lot of parachute journalism after the 2016 election. And I saw so many "think pieces" on Appalachia in the Midwest since I grew up, like, right at the border between the two. And it was so incredibly frustrating for me. And I read a lot of other pieces by Midwesterners and Appalachians. And I realized that one of the most frustrating things was that no one was actually letting Midwesterners tell their own story.

[00:06:22] **Raechel** Right.

[00:06:24] **Kendra** So why for you, as a writer of a memoir, is it so important for Midwesterners to be able to tell our own stories?

[00:06:31] **Raechel** I definitely agree with that sort of parachute journalism being really frustrating. And I know . . . I think you've had Elizabeth Catte on too, who wrote WHAT YOU'RE GETTING WRONG ABOUT APPALACHIA. And I really resonate a lot with this sort of mission of people like Elizabeth and many other writers, some of whom I know you'll have on during this series to allow a story of some of the . . . to thwart some of the stereotypes, basically.

[00:06:55] **Raechel** So for me, a lot of my book is about class. And . . . because the Rust Belt in particular is also very associated with industry, which is true—there is a lot of industry in the US, or rather, in the Rust Belt—but I think that there is a lot of sweeping over of what that means. Like there's sort of like, oh, that means it's like white male factory workers that go work in the steel mill, and that's that. And it's a troubling stereotype of the working class because the working class is disproportionately women. The working

classes disproportionately not white . . . when we think about people who are struggling economically. And so as a person who was raised by a single mom, who saw her work in these sort of service industry jobs and newspaper delivery and all these other sort of jobs that exist, again, all over the country . . . but I got to see it through the sort of like industrial struggling city landscape. I think that it helps remind people that it's not just like these Ford white dudes that go and build cars or something.

[00:08:00] **Kendra** I have just so many images of like . . . all of the ideas that people had. And they would go, and they would go interview coal miners or whatever. And they would do like those news spots.

[00:08:11] **Raechel** Right.

[00:08:11] **Kendra** I was just like, "No, go to the Dollar Tree." You know, like.

[00:08:16] **Raechel** Yes. Oh, my gosh. Yes. Yes. The Dollar Tree. Very intimately familiar with the Dollar Tree. That is where . . . that is where my working class life happened a lot. Yeah.

[00:08:28] **Kendra** So in your introduction, like you've already mentioned, you talk a lot about class in your memoir. And you describe yourself as a class straddler. What is a class straddler? And how does that affect the way that you see the world?

[00:08:42] **Raechel** Yeah. So I got that term from a therapist, which I think is already telling because it means I sort of have access and, you know, time and money and health care to have a therapist. What it means to me is that a lot of times you'll hear these sort of rags-to-riches story. Like . . . she grew up poor, and now she has a PhD and, you know, a nice apartment and can, whatever, afford to shop at Whole Foods (even though, I have a lot of problems with Whole Foods). And even though that is my story, like everything I just said is true, I really didn't want to tell that story because I think those rags-to-riches stories really uphold capitalist myths that we can all just sort of pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, which of course, is not is not the case.

[00:09:19] **Raechel** And that's also, even though on paper, you know, not in a book-length memoir on paper, but sort of the list of what my life looks like on paper . . . it kind of looks like I did that. But it's just not true that if you grow up poor, that when you have financial stability—sort of whatever that means, you know, relative to your early life—that you're not . . . you're never not impacted by the poverty of your early life or the class conditions of your early life. And that shows up a lot of times in trauma. Having economic scarcity in a capitalist system is traumatizing. And so, you know, I have been diagnosed with PTSD, complex PTSD, because of somewhat related to poverty as well as some other things that happened in my life. So that already means that you're never sort of like . . . from what it means to be poor.

[00:10:09] **Raechel** And another thing, sort of on a less dark side, because that's not fun. You know, trauma, obviously, that's not a good thing. But there's also . . . as I was writing this book, I mean, so much of the book is how I'm grateful for I am . . . how grateful I am for, rather, growing up in a working-class community. My early life was very much what people would stereotype as sort of like white trash living. My dad raced stock cars and worked on cars. And people swore and were tattooed. And just, you know, every sort of esthetic marker. You know, "Tiger King" is really big right now. Like "Tiger King" reminded me of home a little bit.

[00:10:49] **Raechel** So those esthetics, I actually you know, I grew up as I, you know, as I sort of climbed my way into educational access. You know, went into a lot of debt but did go to college, a four year liberal arts college and then went on to get a PhD. And the sort of further up I got, the more I understood that I was no longer in a world that I understood. You know, I was being introduced to people who had wealth that I had no idea even existed. And just the sort of ease and access that I started to have in my life that was so unfamiliar, so foreign to what I grew up with . . . and getting really angry that things got so much easier, even with just a little bit more, not even. . . . Certainly in grad school, I had a lot of picture of what it meant to be middle class and upper middle class, even though as a grad student you're usually making below the poverty line. I was making, I think, \$14,000 dollars. But I was still being treated as though . . . treated much differently than how my mom is treated, for example. Just given, you know, what I was . . . how I was talking, where the spaces I was now existing in. And so anyway, that having to navigate that and negotiate that is what that sort of metaphor of straddling comes from because it's like I never didn't feel like I was also simultaneously. . . . It never . . . it never felt natural. Right? Like existing still to this day, you know, it doesn't feel comfortable when I'm in sort of upper middle class or upper class spaces because that's just not how I grew up. So that straddler metaphor is like there's always a foot in both.

[00:12:30] **Kendra** I really love that term because that's how I feel I live my life. And I remember, I was talking to a coworker after grad school. And she was talking about buying a planner. And it was \$40 for a pocket planner. And I was like thinking. . . .

[00:12:48] **Raechel** Woah.

[00:12:48] **Kendra** She's like, "What do you think of this planner?" And I'm like, "Why on earth? I get those free from like when I buy my checkbooks?" I was so confused, but I knew that that's not what I was supposed to say. I was supposed to say, "Oh, that's cute." You know, like.

[00:13:02] **Raechel** Totally.

[00:13:03] **Kendra** And I will walk down some streets, and the houses are so nice. And I feel physically smothered because I know I'm not supposed to be there.

[00:13:13] **Raechel** Yeah.

[00:13:14] **Kendra** It's not. . . . And so many parts of your book, I was just like, yes, like this is the description of what it's like to try . . . when you go, and you go to school, and you find yourself in new places, you're like, but I don't feel like I belong here still.

[00:13:29] **Raechel** Right. Right. Exactly.

[00:13:31] **Kendra** But there's also a lot of complications when you go back as well, and you go see family and friends who are still in those working class spaces. For you, you now live in Minneapolis. So when you go back home, what is that like and what are the difficulties of maneuvering those spaces being that you have kind of one foot in both places?

[00:13:55] **Raechel** Yeah, I mean, that's another space that I like . . . I feel like I want to, like, complicate also the narrative that it's like nobody from my working class life, like,

understands how I talk because I have a PhD. And like so sort of like, there are actually some ways in which it's not difficult at all because my mom is super smart, even though she didn't graduate from high school. Like, you know, I can have a conversation with her in a similar way I can have conversations with my friends in Minneapolis. So in some ways I want to push against that it's super hard all the time.

[00:14:25] **Raechel** But then also. It's been very difficult to go back and be reminded of, for example, that my mom is still is very, very low income. And we, as I talk about in the book, there were times when we were as low income as she is now. And there were other times when she had like a stable job. And then we would dip back down again. So it was a little bit of a rollercoaster. But when I do go back home and am reminded of what it was like to, you know, have to only put the amount of gas in the car that she actually has physically like in her wallet as opposed to. . . . That was a big . . . that's a big one for me. And if I go home, I'm like, "Please, Mom, let me fill up your gas tank." And she's like, "It's fine. I'll just put \$7.56 in because that's what I have now. And then I'll, you know, next paycheck, I'll put however much I can afford after that." And just these moments of like being reminded of how difficult it is to be poor and how much easier it's been since I've not been in that sort of economic bracket.

[00:15:25] **Raechel** So that is the painful . . . that's the stuff that is challenging. Like that painfulness of like, all of a sudden, I now have a decade now at least . . . over a decade . . . well, about a decade since I've been actually having sort of full-time income, although that's been on and off because of academia, but relatively had access to this sort of different class life. You know that I . . . you become so comfortable with it. And so when I go back home, and I'm reminded of how uncomfortable it is, there's I mean, I can feel that physically in my body. And it makes me . . . it puts me in that like sort of "I want to save my mom" mode. And that, as I know from being . . . formerly being poor and I can see it in her too, like she doesn't want to be saved. It's difficult for her, you know, for me to sort of swoop in. And that's another thing that I think that my personal experience has helped shape my politics because I also believe, like the solution isn't like charity from do-gooding rich people or philanthropy even from giving rich people. But it's like actually sort of a challenge to the entire capitalist system that would create conditions for somebody who works so hard and still has so little to show for. Does that make sense?

[00:16:37] **Kendra** No, it definitely does. I was recently reading a book I hated, which I won't name. But they were trying to answer the question how on earth working-class people remain poor? And they were doing everything under the sun besides addressing the overarching system. Like you know, they suffer from addiction or whatever. I was like, they do realize you can do everything "right" and still be poor, right?

[00:17:07] **Raechel** Exactly.

[00:17:07] **Kendra** It has nothing to do with that. And so I just ranted about it to like my spouse and all of my friends. And thankfully they're not going to read it now. I was like, I sacrificed for you. I read it. So you don't have to.

[00:17:19] **Raechel** Thank you for your service. Yeah, off air you can maybe tell me. Yeah, it's so infuriating because, yeah, you can do everything right and still end up, you know, in economic scarcity. Or on the flip side, you can do literally everything they probably listed—addiction, break the law, like all of these things—but if you have money, you're not going to be criminalized . . . destitute, you know, in conditions where you can't feed your family, et cetera. So anyway, that's enraging.

[00:17:47] **Kendra** Very, very much so. So talk a little bit about where you're from. This episode in particular is about Cleveland. And I really loved your introduction. And I marked it up within an inch of its life, I think. But I really like a section here on page eleven. And you say, "This story then is about growing up in poverty in rural Ohio, finding hope in the alternative culture I discovered in Cleveland, and how my complicated love for these people and these places is a tenacious part of everything I've done since leaving it." And I really loved how there are these little sections where it's like a love letter to Ohio. And as someone who grew up in Ohio, though a different part of the state, and has left it, I felt a deep connection to this. On the last part of your introduction, you say, "And I think that indelible resilience reminds me of home, of Ohio more than anything." And that is definitely something that I feel. So I wanted to know if you could talk a little bit about Cleveland and the love that you found for it, even though you've now left it and what that's like to have that past in a very specific location.

[00:19:01] **Raechel** Yeah. Well, thank you for naming it as a love letter. That makes me very happy because I did feel very . . . a lot of tenderness when I was writing the book, certainly for the land. And this relates to the how I answered the question about what the Midwest is because I feel really lucky that my early life was in this . . . I always say rural-ish because we were so close to the city. We were like it was . . . we were just the beginning of rural land, but we could also get to the city pretty quickly. But I experienced this sort of, again, this sort of stereotypes of we had a big creek in the backyard, in the woods, and, you know, we'd run around barefoot. And it was just everything you would assume about, like, again, the sort of like white trash, hillbilly nature kids. That's what I experienced. But it was beautiful.

[00:19:44] **Raechel** And I as an adult, there were parts of my life as an adult where I really just romanticized cities because I didn't grow up in a big city. And so, you know, I wanted to go to New York or Chicago. I ended up living in Boston for a bit. And then just having these moments when I just like missed nature and the woods and the creek and just like all of this stuff. So I feel really lucky for having experienced that. But then at the same time, again, because Cleveland proper was so close, I also had a taste of again what I mentioned in the beginning of this sort of pocket of like very rich culture. And there is this street that technically in Cleveland Heights. So it sort of would be like the Brooklyn to New York like so just like a close by city that might as well be Cleveland. And there was a strip called Coventry Road. And it was just every, you know, it was a dream for somebody who . . . a pre-teen who felt pulled to the sort of alternative and then later, punk. It was just like every tattoo shop. Vegan cafes before people knew what veganism was. Like, you know, weed before I knew what weed smelled like, but I definitely smelled it a lot back then on that street. The sort of like indie art house, movie theater. Coventry's been gentrified a lot. So if you go back there, it certainly doesn't have that sort of romance to it anymore, which kind of breaks my heart. But there's still these little spaces that I go back, and I'm like, Oh, I feel so lucky that I have that. And so those too, like those spaces were so, so important to me, like the ruralness but then also the sort of like rich artistic cultural haven.

[00:21:15] **Raechel** And then that was all juxtaposed literally. Like we would drive from my rural home to Coventry and pass the smokestacks and steel mills. And so I also sort of without ever sort of naming or thinking about it until much later in my life when I became a Marxist who was obsessed with the labor movement and labor and working conditions and all these things, never really, you know, said that out loud. But but really had these like deep intrinsic lessons about labor and about what it means to live in an industrial city where people get laid off, and where people keep going anyway.

[00:21:51] **Raechel** And this is another moment that I kind of contradict myself because I've done a couple interviews where I like state right upfront, like there is there is no monolithic respect. Like I'm telling one particular story. One reason I want to do that is to, like, name, you know, really radical left thinking even in white trash communities that people assume are Trump communities. And, you know, naming all those specificities. But then at the same time, I start to get really romantic about the resilience of people in the Rust Belt, which is a little bit monolithic and overgeneralizing and sweeping. But I do think it's kind of undeniable to think about a city like Cleveland, which literally it's, you know, our river has caught on fire. We . . . so many people lost jobs. You know, it's not been known . . . it's the butt of jokes. Like there is something like "Cleveland, at least it's not Detroit" is like a thing that people say. Like just like mean, nasty comments. There was actually Cleveland was just featured on the Bachelor series. And it was like the joke of Twitter was like how hilarious and unfortunate that these women had to, like, go to Cleveland for their bachelor trip. So it's been the butt of a joke. And yet I grew up with what I feel like was deep resilience in the face of all that and people who found ways to make it work anyway. Yeah. So I feel really those are sort of all the components that were kind of operating.

[00:23:11] **Kendra** I think one of the things about growing up somewhere and then leaving it, you can kind of turn around and look at it from an outsider's point of view and to be able to see that. So for where I grew up in southern Ohio, I love it so much. Like when I see the Ohio hills, like that is home to me. But when I go back, I'm reminded why I don't live there anymore and how I don't feel like I fit in there anymore because I don't. And the difficulties of, you know, having those two contradictory feelings in the same place of loving a place, but also knowing I couldn't live there, but still fighting for it and fighting for its space in the wider world.

[00:23:55] **Raechel** It's similar to the class straddler. It's like geography straddler. Like, it's like, you know, feeling, never feeling. And, you know, there's a lot of like great sort of critical race theory on this about people who feel like they occupy spaces in more than one racial category. But it is that like never feeling like you're fully, fully home because home doesn't feel like home. But anywhere else you go doesn't feel like home. And at least that's what I'm . . . I'm not projecting that onto you, but that's sort of what I'm thinking about as you're saying that because that's true for me.

[00:24:25] **Raechel** So I really have been primarily in the Midwest. I'm from Cleveland. I went from Cleveland to Chicago for college and then Chicago to Minneapolis for grad school. And then I had about, I think, probably about five years in Boston. And I really . . . there were moments, and I write about this in the book too, where I really thought I was destined to be an East Coaster. I was like, that's where like. . . . Yes, I like got a taste of Coventry and arts culture. But I was like, oh, like New York and like any East Coast city, like that's where I belong. And I struggled on the East Coast. Like there was a lot of things that I warmed to, and I really appreciated and now I even miss now that I'm back in Minneapolis. But I will say that again, even though I already made the caveat that it's like not a monolith, and it is more complex, like there is something. There are like undeniable energies to, I think, different regions. And the East Coast energy was just tough for me. And so when my partner and I decided to come back, to basically leave Boston . . . we both work. He works remotely. And I was unemployed at the time. And I knew that I was probably going to find adjunct work wherever we made the move. And we picked Minneapolis, which is the Midwest. Yeah, so I'll just say that. The energy of the Midwest does feel like home, more than other regions, even though it's distinct and complex and all these things.

[00:25:46] **Kendra** I guess the last question I have for you. Are there any other Midwestern women writers that you would recommend to our listeners if they want to learn more about the topic?

[00:25:57] **Raechel** That is a great question. And I feel like, and I know you ask about books, but now I have to think about my Midwest authors. Well, I am excited that you're going to have the author of RUST on, which I didn't know about until . . . I don't think either of us knew about each other, but we were clearly writing our books around the same time. So I'm really excited to read that. I have a copy, and I'll be excited to listen to that interview. Can I mention a really nice feminist man? Or is that against the rules?

[00:26:28] **Kendra** Oh no, go ahead.

[00:26:30] **Raechel** I hate to do this, but he's a really good dude, and he's on my same press. So Belt Publishing, founded by two women, so maybe that is better. We were kind of like Belt cousins at the same time. Like we were both writing our books at the same time, and his just came out. His name is Phil Cristman, and his book is called MIDWEST FUTURES. And it's all about the Midwest. I really think you'd like it. It's yeah, it's a wonderful, like, intellectually a conversational history of the Midwest with like good political critique of it. And so, yeah, he is a dude, but his book is coming from Belt, which is woman owned.

[00:27:08] **Raechel** And another Belt author who is a woman, Vivian Gibson just wrote THE LAST CHILDREN OF MILL CREEK. This is the first book she's ever written. She's retired, an African American woman from St. Lewis who is writing about this town that she grew up in that was literally razed to the ground and completely destroyed and sort of what it's like to have experienced that. And she's just amazing. So definitely shout out to Vivian.

[00:27:32] **Raechel** And let's see of other things I read recently. I mean, she doesn't necessarily write about the Midwest specifically, but Adrian Murry Brown is one of my favorite writers and thinkers ever. And she lives in Detroit. And I think that her relationship to Detroit's activist community and to Detroit itself, I think really informs a lot of her writing. And so I just give a shout out to her, a Michigander.

[00:28:00] **Kendra** Well, I mean, from Ohio, I guess that's acceptable. You know, with our . . .

[00:28:06] **Raechel** Our rivalry, I know.

[00:28:07] **Kendra** Our rivalry going here.

[00:28:08] **Raechel** I know. I know. I know. My partner is actually U of M, U of Michigan grad. And I actually kind of don't care. But my mom gives Logan the hardest time about it. So. Yeah.

[00:28:26] **Kendra** Well, thank you, Raechel, for coming on the podcast and talking all about your book about Cleveland.

[00:28:31] **Raechel** Thank you so much.

[00:28:33] **Kendra** Yeah, thanks so much.

[00:28:34] **Kendra** And we'll be back with more from this episode of Reading Women after a word from our sponsor.

[00:30:20] **Kendra** So thanks to Raechel for chatting with me about her memoir, RUST BELT FEMME, which is out from Belt Publishing.

[00:30:28] **Kendra** Now I'm going to be talking to the author Eliese Colette Goldbach, who is the author of RUST: A MEMOIR OF STEEL AND GRIT. And Eliese used to be a steel worker at a steel mill in Cleveland. She received her MFA in nonfiction from the Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts Program. Her writing has appeared in several different publications, and she is now a professor in Cleveland. So I was very excited to talk to her about her memoir and what it was like being a steel worker. I think those of us who don't work in a steel mill but have heard a lot about it . . . or I know I'm curious about how a steel mill works and what is that job like and what was her experience with that, especially being a woman in a male-dominated field. So here is my conversation with Eliese Colette Goldbach.

[00:31:33] **Kendra** Well, Eliese, welcome to the podcast. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:31:37] **Eliese** Yeah. Thank you for having me.

[00:31:39] **Kendra** So I really enjoyed your memoir, and as soon as I was like about halfway through, I told one of our co-hosts, Jaclyn, that she definitely needed to read it. So she picked it up as well and loved it. So I think it's becoming a Reading Women favorite for sure.

[00:31:54] **Eliese** Oh, thank you so much.

[00:31:57] **Kendra** So your memoir is about working at a steel mill in the Rust Belt. So for our listeners who may not be from the United States or not from the area, what is the Rust Belt?

[00:32:10] **Eliese** I mean, I would, I think that a lot of people have a lot of different answers for that. But I guess I would say the Rust Belt is kind of a subset of the Midwest that kind of seems to extend maybe from like Buffalo to kind of maybe to about Chicago, maybe a little bit farther west and kind of just really encapsulates these towns that were built on like steel and industry and manufacturing and just kind of these cities that have like a really proud history of that, like Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, things like that.

[00:32:41] **Kendra** You started working at a steel mill in your late 20s. What occurrences happened that you ended up working there?

[00:32:51] **Eliese** Yeah, it was definitely someplace I never expected to land. I went to college, and I did all that stuff. And it was just there weren't many jobs available. And I couldn't seem to get my foot in the door any place. And I even went to graduate school. And then I was kind of over-educated and underqualified for a lot of positions. And so I was working as a house painter, just to kind of to make ends meet. And it wasn't a very reliable job. You know, it was very seasonal, didn't have health insurance. And a friend of mine worked down in the mill and kind of talked to me about it and showed me his paycheck, told me about the benefits, and suggested that I apply. And it just, you know, I kind of lucked out and was able to get into the mill.

[00:33:33] **Kendra** So what kind of work did you do at the steel mill? And I guess a broader question would be like what happens at a steel mill? I know like they make steel, but I'm not really sure, and I guess until I read your book, like what all that entailed.

[00:33:47] **Eliese** Yeah. I had no idea what happened in the steel mill other than, oh, okay, steel is made here. And it's actually like this huge process. In the steel mill in Cleveland where I work, you know, it's about 950 acres. So it's like I mean, it's just so expansive. And it's all these different departments. And basically what they do is they take raw iron ore, and through various different processes, turn it into like finished beautiful steel. Some of it's galvanized. And, you know, it has to go through all of these different steps and stages. You know, it gets turned into like molten iron, and then the molten iron goes someplace else and gets turned into molten steel, and the molten still gets cooled down. And then it kind of gets stretched out like spaghetti, and then it gets rolled up. And it's just like all these processes that happen to the steel. And during my time there, I did a lot of different jobs. I worked in the finishing department for a lot of the time, which is kind of like the last step before the steel goes to customers when it's getting smoothed out and kind of perfected, all the little imperfections are getting worked out. So I used to like package the steel before it went to customers, but I also spent some time running a crane. I also worked down in the furnaces, and I would use a forklift to replenish all of the raw materials that are used in the steel-making process. So I kind of ran the gamut of different jobs.

[00:35:10] **Kendra** And one of the things that was just impressed upon me when I was reading your book is just how dangerous the steel mill is and so many of its different steps as well.

[00:35:21] **Eliese** Yeah, I mean, there's kind of danger around every corner, even just kind of walking in the buildings. There are always these cranes that are overhead, and, you know, they can drop things. And you don't want to get caught underneath them. And just the sheer size of the equipment is just mind boggling. You know, you can feel this huge power rumbling in your chest, like the noise of it. And, you know, the furnaces are hot. There's noxious gases in some of the places that will kind of sprout up without warning. So it's just kind of like you always have to be aware and on your toes.

[00:35:53] **Kendra** So growing up in southern Ohio, in the region that's part of Appalachia, there was a huge coal refinery plant that was there and closed, I think, when I was very young. And then we began to see economic decline in, you know, our small town. But Cleveland has such a huge industry. What is that been like recently with the different steel mills? And how's that affected Cleveland in recent times?

[00:36:22] **Eliese** Yeah, I mean, the mills always had this history of kind of ups and downs, you know, with the economy. And there was a time in the early 2000s when the mill shut down briefly. And then also a little bit after the Great Recession. Everything bottomed out, where it closed down for a short period of time. But it's kind of like kept chugging slowly along. You know, sometimes limping, and so it's kind of been able to remain a part of the community, and, you know, part of the economic landscape. But luckily, like in Cleveland, you know, we've kind of also transitioned to other industries like healthcare and insurance are a big part of our economic landscape now. So we're feeling the effects of the loss of these manufacturing jobs in the city. But we're also kind of trying to revitalize ourselves too and stay on top of kind of forward movement.

[00:37:15] **Kendra** So I think when a lot of people hear about steel mills and "blue collar" work like the steel mill. I feel like a lot of people have stereotypes in their mind of what that might look like or what people might work at a steel mill. What stereotypes would you say that you might have had going into it? And what did you learn, you know, having worked there and met these people and become friends with them and become one of them?

[00:37:42] **Eliese** Yeah. I think, you know, we all have the idea of like the kind of grizzled old man, steel worker who is, you know, a staunch conservative and, you know, has a Harley Davidson and that type of thing. And those people certainly did exist down in the mill. But I also learned that it was much more diverse group of people. There are definitely people with college degrees, people with master's degrees. People who had been . . . one woman was a psychologist before she became a steel worker. And, you know, there were also like younger people, millennials, and people with definitely conservative views, but also a lot of liberal views too, being in Cleveland, which is a more liberal city. So it was kind of just . . . you know, there were definitely some of the stereotypes down there. But everyone really, you know, changed my perception of what it meant to be a steelworker because, you know, all these people have such a sense of community and such a sense of family when they're down there, working in these dangerous jobs and this connection to the union and kind of feeling that pride in what they do.

[00:38:43] **Kendra** And you talk a lot in the book about that pride that they have and a lot of the heritage and a lot of that comes back to when you're sitting down together with your coworkers, and they tell stories of past people who used to work at the mill. Maybe they passed away or there was an accident. Can you talk a little bit about that sense of community and heritage that the steelworkers have?

[00:39:04] **Eliese** Yeah. I mean, I think it is true that like a lot of people who worked on the mill, you know, they have family who works down there or have, you know, fathers or brothers who have worked down there. And so I think that there is like an automatic natural kind of family connection. And you kind of are connected to the history of other people who have done these jobs before you. And there's also kind of this oral history tradition where these stories of kind of tragedies in the mill get passed on. Also, I think just the history of the union also kind of gets instilled in you when you have a job like that, like the kind of thankfulness for what the union provides, the protections it provides, and also kind of a general awareness of how many people have fought for those benefits over the years and the generations. And I think that, you know, a lot of people spend so much time down in the mill. You know, most people who work these jobs are working like mandatory overtime. Sometimes you're like spending more time down at the mill than you are with your own family. You know, you're working night shifts. It's just kind of very grueling. And so I think that there's just an, you know, kind of misery loves company maybe a little bit, where you're in this difficult position, and you kind of bond with the people who can understand what it's like to be down there.

[00:40:17] **Kendra** Yeah. And that was something that was deeply impressed upon me as I was reading your book, how there was this sense of community, and as you got to know your coworkers, how you felt even more connected to the steel mill and like what it does and its past. And it was like it's its own little cultural center in and of itself.

[00:40:40] **Eliese** Yeah, absolutely. You know, it's definitely felt when you would go down into the mill because the mill is actually like in a valley in the city. And so you'd actually go down this big hill, and it always felt like you're kind of just stepping into a different world, like maybe stepping back in time a little bit. The landscape was so different. The people

were so knitted together. And so it really does kind of change who you are, I think to be down there a little bit. Like I still . . . even though I've left the mill, I still kind of want to go back sometimes. And I have the sense of nostalgia when I pass the mill and drive, you know, drive past in my car. And it just feels like it becomes like a part of your blood a little bit when you work down there for a while.

[00:41:20] **Kendra** You worked in the steel mill as one of the few women that worked there. And I wanted to make sure to ask you about that. Like, how was your experience unique, being a woman, working in such a male-dominated environment?

[00:41:34] **Eliese** Yeah, I mean, definitely at first it was a little intimidating. I started out with about twenty-three other people. And I think only two other people in the class were women, which I mean, it kind of sets you up for just being a little . . . feeling a little out of sorts, I think. Like as we were learning to do different tasks in the mill, like, you know, you would get kind of comments from the men. Like when I was learning how to drive a forklift, how they would be like "Oh, yeah, female drivers suck" and, you know, things like that. And so I think in one way, like when you are encountered with that kind of attitude, you end up actually working harder to prove yourself. And I think in some ways, I ended up responding in that way where I was, you know, I just kind of put my head down and was going to show that I could work just as hard as the men or do just as good of a job. There were other times, too, though, I think when I did try to learn how to stand up for myself a little bit more with just comments or people's attitudes. And generally, more often than not, I found that men were helpful or respectful and generally didn't have a problem with women down there. I also found that women kind of banded together and wanted to help each other and be supportive of each other, both inside and outside the mill.

[00:42:47] **Kendra** So you talk a little bit about, in your memoir, about, you know, when you finished your grad degree and then going and looking for work after that. How did you come to decide that you wanted to write your experience at the steel mill as a memoir?

[00:43:03] **Eliese** It took a little while for me to figure out that it was a memoir. I remember the first few days and weeks that I was down in the mill and just kind of working around this huge equipment that was like nothing I'd ever seen before. And in this place that was almost like a like a jungle of, you know, steel and grit and everything. I wanted to describe that world for people. As a writer, I thought it was just so foreign to what most people have ever experienced. And then, you know, kind of as I got to know the people, I really wanted to tell their stories as well. And then, you know, I started working in the mill in the midst of the 2016 elections, and so I felt like I had an important perspective, kind of being an industrial worker in the Rust Belt at that time. And so I started writing, and I thought it was going to be an essay or like a shorter piece. And it just kind of kept growing and growing. And so I decided to kind of just let it get bigger and see where it went and ended up writing a memoir, you know?

[00:44:02] **Kendra** Yeah. And I'm I'm so glad that you did because, as someone from a working-class background from rural Ohio, I've been reading a lot of pieces about it, especially since the 2016 election and a lot of memoirs about working-class people who may not fit the stereotypes that people from the coasts might have about, you know, Appalachian people or Midwestern people. What has been your experience sharing your memoir with other people? And what are their reactions been?

[00:44:32] **Eliese** Yeah, I mean, I think that the reactions have been generally really positive. Before the coronavirus hit and everything, I was able to do some readings. And a

lot of people actually who were former steel workers or had had family who worked in the industry kind of showed up to these readings after hearing about the book. And I think that they were really excited to see this aspect of their experience and this aspect of their history kind of reflected in a way that could maybe reach a broader audience. And to understand that sometimes the mill . . . we look at the mill and all these industrial jobs as like being all about economics and being all about like, oh, it's just about the loss of jobs. That's why people are so sad to see these things go. But really, it is a part of the history. It is a part of the identity and the culture. It's about like, you know, what people kind of latch onto. I think it defines various communities. And I think that sometimes we get so caught up in the economics that we lose sight of that kind of really personal connection, that individual connection that people have to these spaces.

[00:45:31] **Kendra** I definitely think so as well. So you've talked a little bit about how local people responded, which I think is always fascinating to see how people feel about their own city being reflected in a book. But did you have any interviews or interactions with people who weren't from Cleveland when talking about your memoir?

[00:45:50] **Eliese** Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I think that all those people have been just very interested to see what goes on in a steel mill, kind of what the landscape is like, what the people are like. And I think that also just kind of being able to see the more kind of human perspective on things. Just seeing these people as individuals who are just, you know, as varied and different as anyone else, I think has been good for a lot of readers outside of the Rust Belt and outside of the area. And, you know, also, I think . . . in the book, I try to explore the ways in which sometimes we make assumptions based on our political beliefs or where we're from. And sometimes, you know, those assumptions aren't as full, as encapsulating, as they need to be. And sometimes we can be surprised about what people are really like.

[00:46:36] **Kendra** Yeah, that's always something interesting. You know, when I moved down to the South—I now live in South Carolina—people do not know what to make of that very much. And so whatever I work in books, they're always like, "Oh, wait, you live in the South? Why are you there? Like, what are you doing?" Have you had any responses like that? Like people asking you like, "Why Cleveland? Why are you there?" Besides the fact that, I mean, that you're from around the area.

[00:47:02] **Eliese** Yeah, yeah. I mean, I do have a lot of people ask me, like, if I still live there, you know. In Cleveland in particular, I think that we have a lot of people who start out in Cleveland, especially like in music and stuff, and then they go elsewhere. And that's the end of the narrative. Yeah. And so I think that sometimes people are surprised that I do stay. I am still in Cleveland and plan to stay here.

[00:47:23] **Kendra** So what about the city for you, in addition to being home, what about it is special for you? I was talking a little bit with Raechel earlier in this episode, and she now lives in Minneapolis. So her perspective is as someone who grew up there and then moved away. But for you, as someone who still lives there, what is special about Cleveland for you?

[00:47:45] **Eliese** I think that Cleveland has a lot of character and a lot of just like underdog grit that kind of comes with it. I think that, you know, we know that we're not like . . . we're not New York, and we're not Los Angeles or anything like that. We're kind of like, that's fine. We don't want to be. Because we're, you know, we're good at our own thing. You know, we have always been kind of like . . . we always feel like we're second best at

things, but we kind of keep just sailing forth and like put our head down and, you know, we're going to kind of do our own thing. And, you know, I think it's just like that kind of general spirit. I think there's also a lot of authenticity in the city. I think that there's a lot of pride in the things that we do have. You know, like the art museum and the Cleveland Clinic and the Cleveland Orchestra and things like that. I think it makes those gems stand out even a little more. And so I think generally it's, though, that it's that underdog grit that I really love.

[00:48:39] **Kendra** Yeah, I could really see that reflected in your book as we got to know the different people that you worked with. One of the things that I have noticed since the 2016 election in particular, which you cover a lot in your book, is just how people have responded to certain areas of the country. And there's been a lot of like parachute journalism with people going in and like, you know, talking to coal miners in West Virginia or different things like that. But really, people haven't been asking the working-class people themselves to tell their own stories. So for you, why is it so important for blue-collar workers, for, you know, working-class people, for people from the Midwest to tell their own stories?

[00:49:26] **Eliese** Yeah, I think I noticed the same thing in the wake of the 2016 election that, you know . . . and I felt like that was kind of, you know, people would come in and be like, Oh yeah, I've solved the Rust Belt. And I felt like it was never really getting to the core of the problem. And I think that it's important to hear these stories both so that we understand that, you know, the Rust Belt is actually more diverse and more varied than sometimes we like to think. And I think that it also humanizes people, you know, a group of people that sometimes maybe gets the short end of the stick. You know, the more that we tell these stories, I think, and explore them . . . I think the more we can understand part of the divides that I think caused the 2016 election and has kind of led to this real political animosity that we're seeing now.

[00:50:16] **Kendra** We've talked a lot about own voices writers in this conversation. What are some Midwestern women writers that you would like to recommend to our listeners?

[00:50:26] **Eliese** I know that you have interviewed someone who is published by Rust Belt Chic. And so I would definitely recommend like Anne Trubek. And I mean, I don't know how much like Sarah Smarsh, I think, kind of falls in like a Midwestern kind of writer, but maybe not Rust Belt.

[00:50:42] **Kendra** I agree. I love Sarah Smarsh, and her podcast is amazing. Well, thank you so much for coming on the podcast and talking about the Rust Belt with me. And I hope everyone goes out and buys a copy of your book.

[00:50:55] **Eliese** All right, thank you so much.

[00:51:03] **Kendra** So, so far, we've talked to Raechel about her experience growing up in working-class Cleveland area. And then we talked to Eliese about her experience working in the steel mills and what that was like. But now we're going to talk to Sachi, our very own Sachi, about what it's like to grow up in the Cleveland/Greater Cleveland area and what her experience has been like being a bookish person that lives in northeast Ohio.

[00:51:29] **Sachi** Yeah! Thanks for having me on for this special episode.

[00:51:32] **Kendra** Yeah. This might seem kind of random, like me saying, Hey, Sachi, guess we're doing an episode about Cleveland.

[00:51:39] **Sachi** Hey, any chance to talk about my city where I live—I'll take it because there's not a lot of like books or movies or anything featuring my area. So any chance to talk it up and talk about why I love living here is a good opportunity that I will take.

[00:51:59] **Kendra** Definitely. So what are some your favorite parts about living in northeast Ohio?

[00:52:03] **Sachi** Sure. Yeah. So for those who might not know me, I live in the northeast Ohio area and obviously I'm only really speaking to that experience and not sure very different than some of the other segments in this episode or even folks, you know, in other parts of the Midwest. I have always kind of lived in suburbia in the Midwest, so I kind of grew up all over because my dad was in military. But I've been in Ohio ever since 5th grade. And so always kind of lived in suburbs of the Cleveland area. Anywhere between like 30 and 40 minutes away from the heart of the city downtown. Some of my favorite parts about living in northeast Ohio is . . . the biggest thing is that it's very affordable and very accessible. And when I say accessible, I mean from like, you know, it's very easy to drive in and out, you know, find parking and things like that. And driving into the city is different than if you're driving into Chicago or even other really like large Midwestern cities. And obviously just the housing and food and entertainment is very, very affordable here. I lived in San Francisco for a year for my job. And when I came back to Ohio, I was like, wait, I can get like a dinner for two, get drinks, and have an appetizer with my husband for like less than \$100? This is wonderful! Like, the drink prices alone in major cities are like a full dinner here in Ohio. So Michael Symon, the, you know, Food Network chef, is from Cleveland and has multiple restaurants: shout out to Lola and Lolita because I love those places. They're so good.

[00:53:45] **Sachi** Also, I feel like the Midwestern hospitality is something that I feel, at least in Cleveland—there're still like straight-up rude people like, let's be serious; there's rude people everywhere—but I will say that I feel like people here are generally, you know, nicer than other areas of the country. Like sometimes I get on a flight, and I am what . . . I act as what I think is just normal politeness, like helping people put away their trash or whatever. Or, you know, who knows, sparking nice like small talk or conversation. People are like, "You know, you're so nice!" They're like, "Where are you from?" And I'm like, "I'm from Ohio. And this is how people normally act!" Like we're just nice people, I guess and stuff. So I feel like Midwestern hospitality is kind of a real thing. Warm and fuzzy people here. Not like super mean and grumpy or anything.

[00:54:37] **Sachi** And we also, if you're a sports fan, we got sports. We have Cleveland specifically. We have basketball, baseball, and football all in the same downtown area. And we have, you know, Akron, which is just outside of Cleveland, is home to LeBron James, one of the greatest basketball players of all time. If that doesn't sell it for you, I don't know what else does. He brought us a championship after a 52 year drought. And I just love the man to death. We also, for entertainment, have one of the largest amusement parks in the country. And that's Cedar Point.

[00:55:14] **Kendra** Cedar Point is the best. The best.

[00:55:16] **Sachi** So if you love roller coasters and thrills and all kinds of stuff . . . and it is just awesome. We have so many roller coasters. People come in from around the world.

You'll see. You'll hear like people from different countries speaking different languages because, like, it's a world-renowned attraction. My family in Japan had heard about Ceder Point, and they were so excited to go there.

[00:55:35] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:55:36] **Sachi** So we also get all four seasons, which I really missed when I lived in California. Not having fall and spring and, to an extent, winter—because I have a very tumultuous relationship with snow and winter, which is horrible here—but I will say we get every season. And the landscapes here are beautiful. We don't have mountains or anything. So like I get if you are into rock climbing or whatever, like, probably can't satisfy you there. But we do have wonderful hiking. We have really great cliffs and things like that. Those are kind of my favorite parts about living in northeast Ohio.

[00:56:10] **Kendra** So we've talked about a lot about, you know, why I love Ohio. Why you love Ohio. But what are some misconceptions about the Midwest that you might see in a more specific bookish content, whether in the books that you read or just ideas that people have about Ohio in general that you'd like to like, I don't know, set to right.

[00:56:32] Yes, I got all kinds of fun misconcep—Not fun! Not fun!—I have misconceptions for you, Kendra, because there are a lot of common misconceptions. So if you've never been to Ohio, or you've never met anyone from the Northeast Ohio or Ohio region or even the Midwest, here are some things that you can learn and never mention to someone in this area. Okay? So. The first one and the biggest one, like when I asked my husband this too, this was the first thing that came to both of our minds. He's someone who's born and raised in northeast Ohio. Biggest, in my opinion, misconception is that we're all rural farm town people and that there's no major cities in Ohio. This is the . . . I will meet people from . . . when I'm on vacation. And they're like, "Oh, Ohio, like, do you live on a corn farm?" And I'm like, no, I don't live on a corn farm. I've never worked on a farm. It's just like so offensive to me. And so like some of the major cities—hopefully people know this already—are Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. There's a lot of other big cities like Akron that I mentioned, but those are kind of the main ones.

[00:57:44] **Sachi** And, you know, a big . . . another kind of . . . second common misconception is that there's like there's no liberal people here. They're all like super conservative, old white people. And in those cities specifically, it's similar to the rest of the country where, you know, a lot of cities are kind of blue areas, and rural areas are red. We have that here too. Like it's not all red. We used to be a swing state. So it definitely has swung a little bit more red in the later years. But when you look at polls and election results, like usually the Columbus and Cleveland areas specifically are very, very blue. And that, I feel like, is something that, you know, when I tell people that I'm not conservative and identify as a Democrat and liberal, people are very surprised. There are people like that out here. So. My husband's whole family are very historically very . . . very, uh, liberal. So we do exist. We're not all farmers or industrial workers either. Like, you know, we have examples, like you had said, of different segments of people who work like in the steel yards and stuff like that. But like I personally have never had any experience in that or anything like that. I work in manufacturing. So it's kind of similar, but yeah, definitely not all farmers, for sure.

[00:59:09] **Sachi** Another common misconception is that there is no diversity or people of color, which is definitely not the case. I would say that, you know, especially in the suburbs, things are more predominantly white. But that doesn't mean that there are no

people of color. And I feel like usually people of color and people, like myself, who are biracial often get erased from the narrative when it comes to living in the Midwest or Ohio specifically. And we are here! Like we are alive and well. There is diversity. I'm just very, very tired of people saying that, you know, all the diversity is only on the coasts because that's definitely not the case.

[00:59:58] **Kendra** Yeah, and you shouldn't have to just fight to prove that you exist before you even talk about your own life experience. That's just exhausting.

[01:00:06] **Sachi** Yeah, it's really, really tough. And I'll talk a little bit more about that one when we talk about authors and stuff later. But that's always been my experience. I've hardly seen representation, you know, from my aspect of being Asian American and being biracial specifically. Things have gotten a lot better in recent years with Asian American literature and showing protagonists that that are biracial. But even then, to take it a step further to, you know, see representation of Asian Americans or even biracial Asian Americans in Ohio specifically is so tough that like I feel like I've never fully represented ever when it comes to literature and such that it's just, yeah, it's hard to explain to people that, you know, it shouldn't be this hard to find a character that you identify when there have been years and years of folks that you know, are . . . have a "normal" majority type and set of of demographics, I guess is what I'm trying to say that have been represented for many, many years. It's like hard for some people to imagine.

[01:01:15] **Sachi** Another common misconception is that there's nothing to do here.

[01:01:18] **Kendra** I think you solved that.

[01:01:19] **Sachi** There are things to do. Please see previous section. There are plenty of things to do and see and eat and things like that here. You know, the fact that people I commonly see in literature, specifically, that, you know, Ohio is a place to drive through on a road trip when you're trying to go from one coast to the other. And people gloss over it or they say, like, we drove through Ohio, and I'm glad we didn't stop. It was nothing special. Like extremely offensive. And I've seen this in multiple books and multiple books, like even in recent releases. I'll get an arc of a book and see something that says like, oh, yeah, you know, we pass to Cleveland, and the skyline was just, you know, foggy, boring mass, and I'm glad we didn't stop. And I always mark those arcs, and I check the finished copy to see if that comment still stays. It always does. And it just like . . . I feel like it's so offensive. And like people on the coasts that don't flag it as something that could be, you know, offensive to other people who live there. I'm assuming most people haven't actually stayed in and or visited Cleveland, specifically for my area. Speaking from that experience. But like, I just feel like unless you actually have stayed here and experienced the culture to its fullest, don't say that it's not worth stopping to, unless you've actually done it. So.

[01:02:52] **Kendra** I think so many people, because they don't read about it and they don't actually pay attention to other areas, they think it's true. And that's why they don't flag it because they're like, oh, why should they stop? This is true that it's, you know, ugly. And there's nothing there except poverty and, you know, addiction and who knows what else and. . . .

[01:03:11] **Sachi** Right.

[01:03:11] **Kendra** That's just what even.

[01:03:15] **Sachi** Right. Yeah. And if you do stop here, see point number one that I said, it's extremely affordable to stay here for a couple days and like experience really great food. We have a really great theatre scene. Playhouse Square, specifically, in Cleveland has fantastic shows that are high quality and extremely affordable. So it's like even if you are taking a road trip, and you do cross into Ohio, like stay in Cleveland for a night, like you might actually really love it. And you're not going to spend a lot of money to spend time here.

[01:03:47] **Sachi** One or two other things that I have that are kind of smaller. Another common misconception is that, in my opinion at least, that no one is like cultured or educated here, which like people think that we're all hick town people who graduated high school and never went to college, which is so not the case. I work in a company—I work in finance, obviously, like I've said before—and like there are many people on, you know, in my group, specifically in the finance area that have multiple degrees. They have multiple certifications. There is no lack of education or even continuing education past your your bachelor's. There is a ton of that here. And we have some really reputable colleges as well, like the Ohio State University in Columbus. You know, people love our football there and our band and stuff like that. But it's also a really, really great university.

[01:04:39] **Kendra** And I was, as you were talking, I was thinking also, like most people think, Ohio is this monolith of a singular culture when in reality there are so many different kinds of culture . . .

[01:04:50] **Sachi** Oh, yes, 100 percent.

[01:04:52] **Kendra** . . . running throughout Ohio—Ohio is a pretty big state—in Ohio, period. And, you know, and I feel like Cleveland in particular is just so full of culture and things to do. Cedar Point for me, that clinches it. It's my favorite.

[01:05:07] **Sachi** And it is so wonderful. My one thing that, like, really upset me when I was getting to know my husband is that he doesn't like rollercoasters. So like, I haven't gone to Cedar Point in a long time because I'm not going to ride the rides by myself. But I will say I absolutely loved it growing up. And I told Austin, like when we have children eventually, if that's in the cards for us, I was like, we're going to Cedar Point. Our kids are going to ride roller coasters because this is so annoying to me.

[01:05:35] **Kendra** So we talked a little bit before we started recording about authors and books from Ohio that a lot of people are surprised, might be surprised, are from the area where you're from.

[01:05:48] **Sachi** Yeah. So I jotted down three of my kind of initial ones that popped into my brain. I'm sure there are a ton more from my area in Ohio. But the biggest ones that always stick out to me that like people are like, oh, really? Like they're from where you live? And I'm like, yeah! The biggest one is THE Toni Morrison. She is from Lorain, Ohio. So Lorain is kind of a western suburb of Cleveland. She is widely celebrated in Lorain. And after she passed, I think they were looking to get a Toni Morrison Day on the calendar to be recognized in the state. I've read, you know, a lot of people tried to mislabel her as like not being from the Midwest, and she's like, No. I'm from from the Midwest. I'm from Ohio. And, you know, when I found out that she was from my area, I was just like . . . I would have never gotten that from any of the articles or all the praise that she's gotten. I found out when she passed that, you know, Cleveland or Ohio native, you know, is the town is looking to declare a Toni Morrison Day. I was like, she's from Lorain? I did all this

Googling. I was like, oh, my gosh, how long . . . I've been on Bookstagram for how long? And I didn't even know that Toni Morrison was from Cleveland? Like, this is ridiculous. It's like, how has this happened? So I felt like a really bad Ohioan. That one's huge. I think like that is just a prime example of like talent is not bound to one specific area. You know, you can have greatness all over the country, including the Midwest.

[01:07:27] **Sachi** Another one for me is Celeste Ng. So she is from Shaker Heights. I think she was, I think, born, I think, in Pittsburgh. But she lived most of her life in Shaker Heights, Ohio. When I referred to representation previously in literature, Celeste Ng's *LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE* was the first time that I, like, fully saw myself kind of realized or represented as, you know, having a character or characters and an author that were Asian American from specifically the Northeast Ohio area. Shaker Heights is very close to where I live. That is what really sparked my interest in reading more women of color and reading more Asian titles because I was like, wait, there is stuff that exists that have, you know, Asian American or biracial or even Asian American Midwesterners out there . . . and sparked my love for those titles and to get like a Bookstagram and be involved in the bookish community because I was like, I have stuff to talk about now. There are things . . . like I'm being represented, which wasn't the case growing up. There's a lot of Asian American people will tell you that growing up, you know, we had Claudia Kishi from "The Babysitter's Club" and that was pretty much it. So that was like a huge, huge thing for me to see an author. And I immediately after reading *LITTLE FIRES*, I very, very shortly after read *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*, which was her first book. And I love that one even more.

[01:08:47] **Kendra** It's my favorite too.

[01:08:48] **Sachi** It's so good. And like, if you haven't read it, please read it. It's so good. It's set, I think, primarily in Toledo, I believe, which is also another place in Ohio. Features a family, a biracial family. So I, on a different level, as well . . . you know, not only Asian American, but biracial children in Ohio. I just like identified so much with that book. It is sad. So disclaimer there. Not the sunniest of books or anything like that, but an incredible read, an incredible author. I love Celeste Ng. And she's from my area.

[01:09:22] **Sachi** Last one I put is Phoebe Robinson. She's a comedian, and she has two books that are kind of more humor-related memoirs and essays. And she is from Cleveland. So if you've seen or heard of like *2 Dope Queens*, they have HBO specials and a podcast. And I've also seen standup specials with Phoebe specifically. Like, she talks about, especially in one of her books, she talks about being from Cleveland and like some of the common misconceptions from Cleveland as well and things like that. She's often commented about being from the Midwest and such in interviews and everything. So love her personally. She's hilarious. But I'm also very proud that she's from Cleveland and wanted to highlight some of her books as some really humorous things. You know, we're in quarantine right now. So if you're looking for something really fun, really humorous from a woman of color from Cleveland, definitely check out Phoebe Robinson's two books. So those are kind of the three that I wanted to highlight, women of color specifically, since, you know, a lot of people think that we don't exist out here. We do. And there is literature. So wanted to shout out those three women specifically because I love their stuff.

[01:10:41] **Kendra** And there's so many, like you said, great talent from Ohio. And I think people just kind of need to take the time to slow down and look, to really look and to see that Ohio has so many different kinds of literature and not just Ohio. That a lot of states

that people might consider "flyover" have a rich and deep cultural history that's worth reading about.

[01:11:08] **Sachi** Absolutely.

[01:11:08] **Kendra** And that's one of the things that, moving forward, that especially, you know, beginning with my study of the South and Appalachia, learning about my new home, learning about the home I previously had . . . and I realized pretty quickly it's that it's not just, you know, my areas. It's the entire United States in between the coasts is often very much misunderstood and underrepresented. So, yeah. Yay for Ohio. Yay for Toni Morrison, Celeste Ng. I mean, come on.

[01:11:37] **Sachi** I know. Powerhouses, right?

[01:11:40] **Kendra** That line up. You can't, you can't beat it.

[01:11:42] **Sachi** I know.

[01:11:43] **Kendra** LeBron James and Toni Morrison.

[01:11:44] **Sachi** LeBron James, Michael Symon, all kinds of really great. . . . Neil Armstrong was from Ohio. You know, like space! Walked on the moon. Like.

[01:11:56] **Kendra** Oh my word. And I'm just like, Roy Rogers is from my part of Ohio.

[01:12:02] **Sachi** Yeah, there's a lot of people. There's a lot of people from Ohio.

[01:12:05] **Kendra** It's a big state.

[01:12:06] **Sachi** Yeah.

[01:12:07] **Kendra** All right. Well, thanks, Sachi, for sharing your love of Ohio. It's been great to talk to you about it.

[01:12:11] **Sachi** Yeah. Thanks so much for having me, Kendra.

[01:12:14] **Kendra** I would like to thank my fellow Ohioans—Raechel Anne Jolie, Eliese Colette Goldbach, and Sachi Argabright—for talking to me today. Definitely go check out their social media links and their websites, which will all be in our show notes. And also check out our show notes for links to go buy copies of RUST BELT FEMME and RUST from bookshop.org. We now have a storefront there, so definitely go check that out if you haven't yet. Please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. And thanks to all of you who have already done that. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. To subscribe to our newsletter or to learn about becoming one of our patrons, visit us at readingwomenpodcast.com. Join us next time where Sachi and I will be talking about nonfiction titles for Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. In the meantime, you can find us on social media (@thereadingwomen). And thanks for listening.