

## Ep. 96 | About Us and Growing up African in Australia

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Jaclyn Masters. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And this is episode 96, where we're talking about ABOUT US edited by Peter Catapano and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke.

[00:00:36] **Jaclyn** And you can find a complete transcript and a list of all of the books that we mention today linked in our show notes. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:47] **Kendra** So when we set up our notes for these episodes, under reasons why we wanted to do this theme, it was basically because we love anthologies!

[00:01:00] **Jaclyn** I mean, that's basically it, right?

[00:01:03] **Kendra** I definitely think so. And like we talked about last time, anthologies are a great way to discover new writers. And we had so many examples last time of writers that we discovered through anthologies. And I hope that a lot of our listeners will discover new favorite writers through these anthologies.

[00:01:23] **Jaclyn** And we've inadvertently chosen two that have a lot of different intersections with each other even. So I feel like, hopefully, the conversation that we're going to have about these two books will give you, you know, a good inroad in that way too.

[00:01:37] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. And I love being able to read essays on a single theme. I was always that super nerd in grad school that was looking at themes and trying to make connections. So I read ABOUT US and GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA fairly close together. And there are several different connections there. But yeah, I'm very excited to talk about our two books today.

[00:02:03] **Jaclyn** Yeah. So Kendra, jumping right in, did you want to start us off with the first book?

[00:02:09] **Kendra** Right. So my discussion pick is ABOUT US: ESSAYS FROM THE DISABILITY SERIES OF THE NEW YORK TIMES, edited by Peter Catapano and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. This is an anthology including a wide range of authors talking about their experience being disabled. And I interviewed Alice Wong last month because I really loved her essay collection. So we're going to talk about that a little bit today as well because I don't think you can read two anthologies about disability—which I feel like are pretty rare—and not compare them, which is interesting because there are a lot of similar contributors in both of them. I really liked ABOUT US because it has a wide range of diversity and, you know, race, sexuality, gender, a lot of different intersections. So it's a very intersectional collection, and I really appreciated hearing their experiences. Like, for example, Alice Wong talks about being on Social Security and getting disability from the government and how a lot of people see that as shameful, but how she came to accept that as something not shameful because she is a woman with a disability, and this helps her exist in the world and get the help that she needs.

[00:03:34] **Jaclyn** And I feel like it's a very conversational collection in a way because it's really . . . I feel like it's bringing The New York Times readers in. So the sixty essays that were in the anthology, they were published weekly, I believe, over a two-year period in The New York Times. And one of the things I think was commented on was that it opened up this conversation for New York Times readers. And it almost served a bit of an education kind of role in that regard, sharing with able-bodied people the experiences—own voices experiences—of disabled riders and disabled contributors in the collection.

[00:04:13] **Kendra** And I think a lot of nondisabled readers will be surprised by some of the essays because whenever I talk to people about my own disability, they're like, oh, yeah, cool. But then I'll talk about, in conversation, the accommodations that I've needed. Like I was home schooled because I was disabled. And they're like, oh, you were really . . . you really . . . you're really disabled, aren't you? I'm like, yes! Yes, I am indeed. Imagine that. And so I felt like there were a lot of essays definitely targeted towards nondisabled people to try to get them to understand because, practically speaking, it is—most of the time—nondisabled people are the gatekeepers for disabled people like myself. When I needed help at university, it was nondisabled people who decided whether I was "sick enough" to get that help. When I'm working at an internship or a job, it's typically nondisabled people who decide whether or not I get the accommodation that I need. So I think this does an important part for that, and it is a necessary practical need. But at the same time, I think it's important to talk about and compare it with **DISABILITY VISIBILITY**, which is not focused on garnering empathy or educating nondisabled people. That anthology is just focused on celebrating disability and just appreciating us disabled folks for who we are without having to translate for nondisabled people or, you know, like—I don't know—pander to the nondisabled gaze.

[00:06:05] **Jaclyn** Yeah, I think that that gaze was definitely something I noted when I was reading the two because I also read them pretty closely together. And it was definitely something that you felt there was no need to explain things as much in **DISABILITY VISIBILITY**, and I feel like there was more opportunity for disabled readers to maybe feel seen by that collection.

[00:06:28] **Kendra** You know, I actually watched Toni Morrison's documentary on—I think I watched it on Hulu—around the time I was reading both of these collections. And one of her interviews—which I think is pretty famous at this point—she talks about wanting to write books about Black people, especially Black women, and not translate for white readers. And that was revolutionary when she published **THE BLUEST EYE**. And I think that is really a great example of what we're talking about here. As, you know, **DISABILITY VISIBILITY** are people with disabilities writing without translating for nondisabled readers. Just like we shouldn't view white people as the "default race," we shouldn't view nondisabled people as the default ability.

[00:07:17] **Jaclyn** That's a really good point.

[00:07:18] **Kendra** I felt like there's a huge distinction in that. I still have people arguing with me that being in pain or having a limited ability is a bad thing. But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about a different life experience. I love Elena Ferrante, but she published an essay about how she felt that being disabled meant you lived a less full life. And that's not true. And I hate that I have to tell people that all the time, that my life is just as joyous and filled with meaning as anyone else's. And that's what I feel like **ABOUT US** is doing. It's telling people that our lives are still filled with joy and are worth living, while **DISABILITY VISIBILITY** is just a celebration. If that makes sense.

[00:08:07] **Jaclyn** I actually have that quote written down in my notes from the end of ABOUT US. "A disabled life is a life worth living." And you're right. The point of distinction with DISABILITY VISIBILITY was just . . . it was just a celebration of that. It didn't need to kind of feel the need to explain why it needed to be that. So I think that's a great way you've compared them there. So Kendra, one of the things I know you mentioned in our last episode was who is not included in ABOUT US. So the collection intentionally omits those who don't use verbal language. So, for example, people who use facial expressions. And this is quite expressly noted in the introduction to the collection. Whereas when you're reading a collection like DISABILITY VISIBILITY, I feel like Alice Wong went to such lengths to be very inclusive in the range of ways that contributors could make their contribution to that anthology.

[00:09:04] **Kendra** There was a big event for Alice Wong's collection, and she even had a contributor who was nonverbal who contributed to the panel. And what they did was they gave him the question ahead of time. And he has a computer there that speaks for him, and he just types out his language. He types out what he wants to say, and then he can just hit enter, and it plays it. And it has technology where it reads out that text for people to hear. And when she included an essay with him in the anthology, it was a transcript of him on a podcast. You should definitely check it out because she includes people from a wide range of disabilities on there and a lot of discussions. I was really disheartened to see that ABOUT US didn't include nonverbal people, especially in such a high-profile column with The New York Times. There was a way you could have done that. There was a way you could have worked it out to do that. And I feel like excluding that group of the disability community was definitely problematic with the collection.

[00:10:20] **Jaclyn** I feel like the way that Alice Wong shows that it can be done really . . . for me—because I was writing ABOUT US after I read DISABILITY VISIBILITY—I wondered why that extra step hadn't been taken to make this collection as inclusive as it could have been, and representative as well.

[00:10:41] **Kendra** And I definitely feel like, you know, new technologies that help nonverbal disabled people communicate is such an important topic that we need to be talking about how technology helps disabled people communicate and function and provides accommodation in a world that isn't built for us. And I think that that was a missed opportunity for them to discuss that. They even discuss. . . . They have someone who talks about, in ABOUT US, about how people who are considered to be unconscious and who are in a coma might actually be aware and how it's important to check and make sure and follow these certain procedures and some of the new things that people have learned about people who might be in a coma or on a ventilator or what that looks like and how we need to be more aware of these things and not just write people off because we feel like they're not conscious or whatever, that there's a bias there that they wanted to address in that essay. And it was very well done. And I appreciated them talking about that. If you can do that, if we can find a way to talk about that, I feel like we could still find a way to have nonverbal people included.

[00:11:55] **Jaclyn** So one of the things that I'm really taking away from what we're talking about, Kendra, is that when you're reading anthologies, it's so important to look at as much as what's included as maybe as what is excluded or just not mentioned. And I think here, with this example, we're seeing that something can be articulated in the introduction that's being excluded. It could be that in other anthologies, it's just something that doesn't appear

and is not maybe as pointed to. But it is a sort of interesting reminder to be very conscious when you're reading about what is included and excluded.

[00:12:37] **Kendra** I, overall, I really enjoyed reading ABOUT US, and I think there's a lot of great points that they make. And I felt very much seen in that collection. I still think we can think critically about the things that we read and find the good things, but also, you know, be like, hey, what more could have this book done with its topic or whatever it was doing? And so I definitely felt that about ABOUT US. So I'd still recommend ABOUT US, but I would still, you know, recommend thinking critically about the essays that you're reading and just engaging with them and not being a passive reader. And also check out DISABILITY VISIBILITY. And we have the interview linked in the show notes and everything, if you want to go check that out. I think people should read both of these books, not just pick one or the other, because I think there's a lot of engagement that readers can have with both of them together and a lot of learning and understanding. But also, if you're disabled, you can see yourself in a lot of these essays as well—which is, I think, for me is the most important.

[00:13:40] **Jaclyn** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:13:41] **Kendra** All right. So that is ABOUT US: ESSAYS FROM THE DISABILITY SERIES OF THE NEW YORK TIMES, edited by Peter Catapano and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. And Jaclyn, you have our next discussion pick.

[00:13:56] **Jaclyn** Yes. So the second book that we're going to be discussing in the episode is GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA. And this is edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke, and it's out from Black Inc. Now, if you've been listening to the podcast for a while, you might remember that we covered GROWING UP ABORIGINAL IN AUSTRALIA last year. And that collection is edited by Dr. Anita Heiss. So this is a series that Kendra and I have become very big fans of over the time that we have been talking about books together. And I think, Kendra, you've read the GROWING UP QUEER IN AUSTRALIA collection.

[00:14:29] **Kendra** I really enjoyed it. And I really love how a lot of these anthologies are available on audio here in the US. And I found them on Hoopla. And so I've just flown through them, and I really enjoyed them.

[00:14:43] **Jaclyn** Yeah, and I feel like they cover so much. There's really something that a lot of readers are going to pick up from, no matter which of the particular perspectives . . . like I feel within them, they're so intersectional in the various perspectives and that there's just so much thought put into who the contributors are, I think. And we're very excited because there's another one of the series coming out next year, GROWING UP DISABLED IN AUSTRALIA. And that one is going to be edited by Carly Findlay. But to bring the discussion back to the GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA collection. . . . One of the things that we flagged in the last episode was some of the language that's used in the introduction and that as a way to frame how the contributors in turn reflect it. And Maxine Beneba Clarke makes a point to distinguish those in the African-diaspora Australian community and their identification as being Black with the way that Black Indigenous Australians identify. And very much framing the discussion that those in the African-diaspora Australian community are very much settlers within Australia. So with that said, you know, one of the introductory comments that we quoted in the last episode was that "any discussion of blackness in an Australian context must be set against the history of this truth: we, too, are settlers here."

[00:16:10] **Jaclyn** So this anthology is divided into five parts. And I felt like that gave it a really cohesive and thematic based flow to the different essays that were being contributed. And a lot of the times, the essays in each specific section were really speaking to similar experiences, or there was a lot of points of connection between them. So one of the things that Maxine Beneba Clarke mentions in her introduction, when she's sort of situating where the African-diaspora Australian experience first started, she's able to trace it back to the First Fleet itself. And she notes that the first recorded African-diaspora settlers were Black convicts. And there were eleven people in total and that they were transported by the British on the First Fleet back in 1788. So I think that's a really interesting point to note. And it really situates that this is an experience that's been present in the entirety of the Australian settler experience anyway.

[00:17:11] **Jaclyn** There's no way we could cover all of the different perspectives that are covered in this collection. So Kendra and I thought what we'd do instead is discuss one particular that really stood out to us and that we particularly thought was an interesting one to talk about in conversation with what we've just been talking about with ABOUT US and DISABILITY VISIBILITY. And that is the essay by Carly Findlay, entitled "Complex Color." This one's a really interesting one because Carly is a disability and appearance activist in Australia. You can follow along on Instagram or Twitter, and she has her own blog. And she is a very active advocate in the community.

[00:17:54] **Jaclyn** And in this particular essay, she's talking about how she frames her identity, both in the context of who her parents are and in the context of her skin color as it relates to her ichthyosis condition. The way she describes her parents in the book is that she's saying, "My mum has dark skin. She's South African—classed as a colored in apartheid terms." And then she's also talking about her white English father. So she says, "My parents have black skin and white skin. My skin tone isn't midway; it's red. . . I don't feel black. I don't feel white. How does being those skin colors feel anyway?" So I really found Carly's reflections really interesting. And I know this is something she talks a lot about in her advocacy work, is identifying herself as a woman of color and specifically having red skin—and this not being within sort of a Black or white binary that traditional discussions might sort of center around.

[00:19:06] **Kendra** I think that's why intersectionality is so important because—having read her memoir, SAY HELLO . . . she talks a little bit more about it there—she talks about how her skin color is red and how that is from her disability and how that changes the way that she interacts with the world. And I think that's a very complex topic. But it's important to read and to try to understand because I feel like a lot of people don't talk about people with visible disabilities within the community. It's very much similar, I guess, to the discussion of colorism and how people who appear less disabled are often favored over those who appear more disabled or who have visible disabilities. And that is a conversation that's going on within the disability community. So when she talks about this, it's really interesting because it's also talking about her ethnicity and where she comes from and how that has affected her cultural heritage experience. But when she goes out into the world, she has a visible disability. And that also changes her experience. So it was a very thoughtful essay. And I really appreciated the way that she opened up about that.

[00:20:23] **Jaclyn** Yeah, I think it was incredibly thought provoking in the midst of so much of what we've been discussing today already on these intersections. And I think one of the comments that she made towards the end of her essay was that "whiteness and blackness are more than skin color—they're about levels of privilege." And she situates this within a

discussion where she's talking about race and how that intersects with ableism and the discrimination that she faces in her advocacy work and in her personal life. I just thought that was a really perfect way to frame it. I thought it rounded off what she'd discussed in the essay perfectly.

[00:21:05] **Kendra** Yeah. And I think that she really talks about, just like you said, there are layers of privilege. And I think as an American who's used to seeing race discussed in an American context, this entire collection—on a whole even—was great about me learning about what being Afro Black in Australia looks like and that discussion of where they come from and the history of that . . .and there are so many broad perspectives on that . . . that I felt really helped me situate culturally. Not being Australian, you know, coming to this kind of blind, as it were. And it was very helpful for understanding the broad range of experiences. So I got to Carly Findlay's essay and how her parents had left South Africa so they could get married in Australia. It was just really well done in her discussion of that because she notes that, you know, it's not just visibly what color your skin is, but that privilege from where you come from, where your heritage is. And I feel like she really hit that out of the park with that essay.

[00:22:14] **Jaclyn** Yeah. And I feel like we got a further snapshot into how her mum, Jeanette, talks about this as well because she she mentions that she was discussing this with her mom and how her mum views her race and whether she's ever had to sort of grapple with it in the same way that Carly has. So, yeah, I really, really enjoyed reading this essay. I thought Carly brought up some amazing discussion points, and I thought it was one that was particularly worth noting today in the midst of our discussions.

[00:22:46] **Jaclyn** So one of the other essays that we wanted to mention today—and particularly flag because the contributor is actually a Bookstagrammer as well—and that is Inez Trambas, and her essay is entitled "Negro Speaks of Books." And this was a really interesting essay for so many reasons. I was highlighting galore in my Kindle when I was reading it. But one of the discussions I thought particularly worth mentioning for readers that are also on Bookstagram or BookTube or engage with the way that books are shared on social media. . . . Inez makes a really interesting comment midway through her essay where she says . . . she's talking about finding Goodreads and BookTube and Bookstagram and finding that the way that people were talking about books was really accessible and inclusive. And, you know, they were discussing books that didn't have this kind of academic gatekeeping that, you know, media publications like The Guardian, for example, had. And there's this quote that really struck me. And she says, "These spaces were teaching me so much that I wasn't finding in the mainstream book media." And I know the discussions around racial representation in literature and in the books we read and the people that are gaining access to review copies and who was even sharing these reviews and whether they come from an own-voices perspective—these are all discussions that are so present at the moment, particularly in social media and the publishing industry at large. And the way that it's discussed in his essay, I just thought was particularly striking as well, the way that social media has brought more people into discussions about representation and helping people play a more active role in finding books they want to read and so not just seeing themselves represented in the content of the books, but also in who's talking about the books and whether the way that they're talking about them is an accessible way in any given community. So I really enjoyed this essay, and I was so struck by it. And if you . . . like I said, if you would like to follow Inez directly, we will pop a link in the show notes to her Instagram so you can follow directly.

[00:25:14] **Kendra** I think it's so important for. . . You know, America has the biggest English language book market. And I think it's important to also follow and read and to sit back and listen to people from other English language book markets in particular. And I know this is a little insider baseball, but each, you know, movement towards diverse books is going at its own space and it has its own voices and movements going on that are all worth listening to. And I think her talking about the movement in Australia in particular is incredibly important. And so I was very excited to read that essay because I'm just very excited for those conversations happening in other parts of the Bookstagram world.

[00:25:58] **Jaclyn** Yeah, it really struck me as well. So I would also highly recommend you check out a review on Bookstagram that I came across. It's an IJTV Review by Virna over @the\_Diaspora\_Reader. And again, we'll pop her handle in the show notes so you can check out a link directly. And she talks specifically about one essay that she really connected with. So again, that is GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA, edited by Maxine Beneba Clarke. And it is out from Black Inc.

[00:26:29] **Kendra** So that is our discussion episode. And we have a few further recommendations for you. And it was very difficult to narrow them down. So again, this month's Patreon episode is even more anthology recommendations. But for now, we will leave you with these four. And Jaclyn, you have the first one.

[00:26:47] **Jaclyn** Yes, the first one I wanted to talk about is an anthology called NEW AUSTRALIAN FICTION 2020. And it's edited by Rebecca Starford. And this one is released from an organization in Australia called Kill Your Darlings. I think it's a very cool name. And they've got amazing branding across their social media. But this collection is really interesting because there is such a great mix of names that I've seen and read before and also other contributions by writers that I've just not come across before and now want to read. So I read the 2019 edition of this last year. And the reason I'm mentioning this specifically is that the 2020 version is just about to be launched, like at the time of recording, the e-book is on its way next week. And I think the print publication is already out this week. But these are all short stories. And it's by . . . it's not just women writers; it's a whole range of contributors. But I highly recommend it because I think if you're really looking for which writers are at the sort of cutting edge of what's coming out in Australian fiction at the moment, this is a great way to just sample so many different short story writers particularly. So that's my first recommendation, NEW AUSTRALIAN FICTION 2020, edited by Rebecca Starford. And Kendra, what was your first recommendation?

[00:28:16] **Kendra** So my first one is actually a young-adult anthology called BODY TALK: 37 VOICES EXPLORE OUR RADICAL ANATOMY, edited by Kelly Jensen. And full disclosure, I work with Kelly Jensen over a Book Riot. I'm one of their contributors. But I chose this because I discovered that Alice Wong has an essay in it. And the entire anthology covers bodies, bodily difference, of all different shapes, sizes, and colors. It also looks at people with trans identities and obviously disability. And I was so happy to see that because growing up, I would have loved to see a collection like that. I grew up during the age of, you know, like Christina Aguilera and Britney Spears and like all of these blonde, tanned women. And, you know, I didn't look anything like that. So I would have really loved to be able to see this. And now that my disability is more visible, I feel like I probably would even more relate to it. So I could only imagine as a teenager having a different sort of body than you see on media, you would definitely want something like this. And it celebrates bodies of all different shapes and sizes and abilities. And so I was very grateful for this. Kelly Jensen has edited two other young-adult collections, and they're very multimedia. And they're very colorful and bright, and I've really enjoyed them. So that

is **BODY TALK: 37 VOICES EXPLORE OUR RADICAL ANATOMY**. And Jaclyn, you have another one for us.

[00:29:52] **Jaclyn** So I have another Australian pick for you. And again, this is another anthology that I think is a great inroads into finding some Australian writers that you may not have discovered just yet. The collection is called **COLLISIONS: FICTIONS OF THE FUTURE**, edited by Leah Jing McIntosh, Cher Tan, Adalya Nash Hussein, and Hassan Abdul. And this is forthcoming in November this year from Pintera Press in Australia. And this one came out of a short-fiction writing competition that Liminal, an organization in Australia, had started. And it really stemmed from—and this is discussed in the introduction, which I found really interesting—it stemmed from the lack of representation of Black and Indigenous and writers of color that were being seen on prize lists like the Stella Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Yeah, so these stories are all works that were long listed in that prize. And I really enjoyed it. I thought there was a range of sort of more speculative works that were more sort of realist in nature. I feel like there was sort of something in this collection for everyone. And what really excited me specifically was there were a lot that played very much with the form of short stories, like how the stories appeared visually on the page. Like, I'm thinking the winning piece had almost parallel narratives told through the two halves of the page, and it just worked so brilliantly. I thought was a very cool collection, and it's one that I'd highly recommend people check out. So that's **COLLISIONS: FICTIONS OF THE FUTURE**, edited by Leah Jing McIntosh, Cher Tan, Adalya Nash Hussain, and Hassan Abdul. And Kendra, you have our final pick.

[00:31:46] **Kendra** Yes. So I have been working my way through **LGBTQ POETRY AND FICTION FROM APPALACHIA**, edited by Jeff Mann and Julia Watts. And when I opened this, it was dedicated to those who stayed. And I think if you are a rural, queer person, you will understand how meaningful that dedication is. I'm actually going to recommend "Country Queers" here, which is a podcast about rural queer people. And I think this is an important part of LGBTQ+ life that is often misunderstood or not really celebrated because most people equate LGBTQ+ with major cities like San Francisco or New York. But queer people are everywhere. And so this collection included essays from people like Mesha Maren, who wrote **SUGAR RUN** or Silas House, who I've been reading all of his books recently. And so I've been really enjoying this collection. And I think, you know, West Virginia University Press is doing a great job of highlighting voices like this. So definitely check out this anthology. It also includes additional resources in the back, which is always great for researchers like me anyway. But I would definitely recommend **LGBTQ POETRY AND FICTION FROM APPALACHIA**, which is edited by Jeff Mann and Julia Watts.

[00:33:15] **Jaclyn** That sounds really interesting.

[00:33:17] **Kendra** I am really enjoying it. And there's another one they just put out about, I think, storytelling or narratives in queer Appalachia. So I'm very excited about that.

[00:33:29] **Jaclyn** Did they . . . did that press release **APPALACHIAN RECKONING?**

[00:33:32] **Kendra** They did, yeah! **APPALACHIAN RECKONING**.

[00:33:35] **Jaclyn** Doing good work for the Appalachian Lit genre.

[00:33:38] **Kendra** They are! I mean, West Virginia, you know, they're kind of like the heart of Appalachia, really. Being smack dab in the center. So I think they've been doing a great



job. They even have an entire Appalachian studies section of their press catalog . . . which. . . .

[00:33:53] **Jaclyn** Oh wow. That's very cool.

[00:33:55] **Kendra** I'm just a little bit obsessed with. So. All right. Well, Jaclyn, where can people find you about the internet?

[00:34:04] **Jaclyn** So I'm on Twitter, Instagram, and BookTube (@sixminutesforme). And Kendra, where can people find you?

[00:34:11] **Kendra** And I'm on YouTube and Instagram (@kdwinchester). Yeah, that's it. That's our show. 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 more about becoming one of our patrons, visit us at [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com).

[00:34:41] **Jaclyn** And make sure you join us next time because Kendra and Sumaiyya are going to be talking about books around October's theme, which is "Beauty Standards." So in the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). And thank you very much for listening.