

Interview with Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle

[00:00:10] **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. Today, I'm talking to Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle, the author of *EVEN AS WE BREATHE*, which is out now from University Press of Kentucky. For a full transcript of this episode, check out the show notes on readingwomenpodcast.com or in the description of this podcast. Also make sure you're subscribed so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:42] **Kendra** So I am so thrilled and honored that Annette was up for coming on the podcast. I am just a huge fan already. And I just finished her book yesterday, and I can't stop thinking about it. And so being able to talk to her today was just absolutely fabulous. I heard about Annette's book last fall, but I really became very excited for it when I saw an event with her and Silas House, her editor. And I've been reading a lot of Appalachian literature this year just to try to be able to visit home during the pandemic. And so when I heard about *EVEN AS WE BREATHE*, I was very, very excited. It definitely feels like a combination of two of the things that I love. I live in the South now. I am about an hour, an hour and a half away from Asheville, North Carolina, where this book is set. And I'm also Appalachian. And so being able to see all of these different things in a single book really hit home for me. There's also the fact that this book is written by an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and how that this is one of hopefully many books to come from this band of the Cherokee Nation. And so I'm so excited for that as well. It's incredibly written. The prose is phenomenal. I would just sit and like reread sections. And the novel really transports you to a different time, a different place. And it just has that beautiful quality that great novels have. And so I am so excited for Annette and for, hopefully, this is the first of many novels that she will write. And I'm excited for her, her career, and all of the things. So definitely go out and get a copy of this book.

[00:02:41] A little bit about Annette before we start our conversation. . . . Like I mentioned, she is an enrolled member of the Eastern Band Cherokee Nation, and she lives in North Carolina right now. This is her first novel. And like we talk about a little bit in the interview, her first manuscript, *GOING TO WATER*, is the winner of The Morning Star Award for Creative Writing from the Native American Literature Symposium and a finalist for the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. After serving as executive director of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, Annette returned to teaching English and Cherokee Studies at Swain County High School. She is a former co-editor of the *Journal of Cherokee Studies* and serves on the board of Trustees for the North Carolina Writers Network. So she is very accomplished, incredibly talented, and I hope you love listening to our conversation as much as I love talking to Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle.

[00:03:50] **Kendra** All right, well, welcome, Annette, to the podcast. I'm so excited to talk with you about your book today.

[00:03:57] **Annette** Thank you for having me.

[00:03:59] **Kendra** So I feel like the big question right now is, how are you doing? How are you hanging in there?

[00:04:04] **Annette** Yeah, I'm doing all right. I'm a teacher in a public high school. And so this was the first week we had students back in our classrooms, and they're kind of part time. And so I'm pretty exhausted between that and the book launching soon, so. . . . But things are going well, as well as can be expected right now.

[00:04:36] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. So what grades do you teach?

[00:04:41] **Annette** So, in any given year, I might have 9th grade through 12th grade, freshmen through seniors. This year specifically, I've got 10th graders through 12th graders.

[00:04:53] **Kendra** Oh awesome. Is there any particular field or specialties that you teach? Or do you just teach them the general subjects for high school?

[00:05:03] **Annette** So I teach high school English and Cherokee Studies. This year we're not teaching Cherokee Studies because our language instructor. . . . Because part of our instruction is virtual, and it's difficult to coordinate with a Cherokee language instructor who comes in from the outside. So I'm teaching World Literature and Advanced Placement Literature and Composition.

[00:05:36] **Kendra** Well, that sounds amazing. That might just be the English major in me, but. . . . I feel like a lot of people have, you know, these stories about books they didn't enjoy that they were asked to read, but I typically enjoyed almost every book that I was asked to read for school. So, yeah, definitely. A nerd there, for sure. But I always love to ask debut authors about your publishing story and how you came to publish your first novel because I feel like getting your foot in the door with that first book is always a difficult journey. It can take a very long time. So I guess how was your *EVEN AS WE BREATHE*? How did it come to be published? And how long were you working on it?

[00:06:24] **Annette** Sure. Yeah. So I kind of think about the journey of this book, starting with the novel manuscript I wrote before it became this would be the second full-length manuscript I had. The first one was a finalist for the PEN/Bellweather Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction, and it won another award from the Native American Literature Symposium. And so I felt like I was on a journey toward publishing with the first manuscript and actually got some attention from that. But it never got published. And that's a whole other long story. But the fact that it didn't get published really propelled me into taking a workshop through the Great Smokies Writing Program, which is located in Asheville, North Carolina. It's the western part of the state of North Carolina in the South. The workshop was set up that we had a few assignments that we focused on throughout the course, which were to write a synopsis of a novel—which is incredibly difficult—and to write the first chapter, a final chapter, and a climactic chapter. And so that provided me a structure for the novel. And really it was a diversion from the first manuscript that I was, you know, kind of had to shelf at that point. So it got me moving on to the second manuscript. And the instructor for the workshop, Heather Newton, was very encouraging. She's a writer herself. And so I was able to kind of workshop pieces of that novel and begin writing it.

[00:08:19] **Annette** And then I attend the Appalachian Writers' Workshop, which is located in Hindman, Kentucky, so a little bit north of where I live. It's a writer's program in the summer. And so I workshopped the novel manuscript while I was at that writer's program. And through conversations with the writers and residents there, the workshop instructors and whatnot. . . . There there was some interest in the manuscript. So it was kind of . . . it's kind of an unusual process because the Hindman Settlement School, which is located in the state of Kentucky, was starting an imprint, a fiction imprint with the University Press of Kentucky. And they're identifying potential manuscripts that would fit that imprint. And so I was able to talk with folks involved with that. And Rebecca Gale Howell asked for my manuscript while I was at that writers' workshop for her to review. So she then took it to

University Press of Kentucky, through their process for reviewing the manuscript. And they offered me a contract. So it's not a typical way. You know, usually nowadays, you look for an agent. And then the agent tries to sell it to a publisher. But it really was my participation and involvement with the Appalachian Writers' Workshop that led to publication.

[00:10:06] **Kendra** Oh, that is really fabulous. There have been so many writers recently that I have loved that have come out of Hindman. And it's really a center for Appalachian literature and is really developing that in such a wide range of ways. I mean, I love Carter Sickels's book, *THE PRETTIEST STAR*. And I just fell in love with it because I'm from Appalachian Ohio. And I was like, this is, you know, this is home for me. Like I see these places. Another author that came out of Hindman is Silas House, who I believe edited your book. What was that like?

[00:10:46] **Annette** Oh, it was a wonderful experience. I had met Silas a couple of years—I guess a couple of years prior—and then worked with him on a project where we worked with some of our students at our high school. And of course, he's been involved with Hindman for many, many years. And I knew him through there. And so we had had some great conversations while at Hindman. And so it was a natural fit when we started working on the novel because he understood exactly what I wanted to do. He understood and has been to, spent time in the community that I was writing about. From the get go, the communication was just so clear. And we worked so well together.

[00:11:41] **Annette** Plus it was like my own personal MFA because the way that Silas edits—and, you know, I think he would say he learned this from his editor—is that, you know, he will look at a portion of the manuscript, and he will say, "This isn't working." But then he says, "And this is why it's not working." And then he says, "This is how you might think about fixing it," which is really phenomenal because usually, from what I understand from other writers, it's typical for an editor to say, "This doesn't work. Fix it." So to have the extra steps that that Silas provides, the thoroughness, is just . . . is really remarkable. You know, he always just makes suggestions. He's not there to take over your work. But we just communicated so well. We have a similar style as well. We like to have deadlines and get it done and keep moving. So it was just a really pleasurable experience. And it kind of . . . I was surprised by that because I had talked to other writers who did not have that experience with their editors.

[00:12:57] **Kendra** I attended a virtual event that Hindman was doing. And I really loved the conversation between Silas and you as you were talking about the book and your process. And so when my family got together at a lodge in the mountains of North Carolina, I took Silas House's Appalachian trilogy and *EVEN AS WE BREATHE* together. And I was like, I think this is a good way to do this. And I had never read. . . . I hadn't read either of them. I try not to read synopses. And so when I started *A PARCHMENT OF LEAVES*, where the main character is a Cherokee woman named Vine, I was like, oh, okay. Like, this is what we're doing. And so it was really lovely to read the two together because, you know, even though those books were written twenty years ago—and I imagine there are things he would change in them now, like most writers feel about their work—you could feel that there was a lot of similar themes, especially in regards to place. So I wanted to ask you about place in *EVEN AS WE BREATHE* because—I'm dancing around spoilers a little bit—but place and the meaning of that to Cowney, the protagonist of the novel. There's this deep connection not just physically to his family obviously living on the land for hundreds—if not thousands—of years, but also spiritually. There's this spiritual connection to his home place. And so what was your thought process when you were writing that part of the book and the themes that went along with that?

[00:14:45] **Annette** Yeah, I think place is incredibly important in all of the writing I do. And I don't think about it separately. So I don't sit down and say, oh, I need to make sure that I am conveying place here. It just is kind of inherent in my writing. And I don't know, maybe that is how I grew up or whatnot. But the one thing that I wanted to make sure that I conveyed was that I think a sense of place is important for everyone, regardless of their cultural background or where they grew up. One of the stereotypes of Native Americans in general that was perpetuated really early on in American literature was that Native people always lived in the woods. And there is some kind of weird mystical connection that only Native people had to the environment. That can be a problematic stereotype. All stereotypes can be problematic. It was really important to me that I balance the truth of which is, you know, that these mountains, the Smoky Mountains, Appalachian Mountains, do influence our worldview. And for anyone who grew up here, who, like my protagonist Cowney, his environment is going to influence his worldview. But it's not some kind of mystical connection just because he's Native American. He grew up in these mountains and so was, you know, taught how to navigate them and interact with them. And it is part of our culture to respect our environment, to know that it has all the properties that we need for survival and existence here, like you said, for thousands of years. So it was a balance for me to make sure that this doesn't come across as some of the stereotypes come across. But also that place is very influential in one's worldview.

[00:16:57] **Kendra** And there's some beautiful passages in the book about the mountains. And, you know, I was reading this with my husband, Sam, because—like many listeners know—I have to use audiobooks, or someone has to read it to me because of migraines. And so we read it together. And it was like 1:15 in the morning, and I'm sitting on the edge of the couch, and he's reading these last few pages. And he stops, and he's like, "Oh, my word." And I'm like, "What?" He's like, "You have . . . what is this?" I was like, "You can't read ahead. You can't read ahead, honey." And so he reads these last few pages, which are about, you know, that just bring the novel together. I don't want to give any spoilers. But there's this beautiful sections about the mountains and Cowney's connection and the realities of that and his feelings. And it was a beautiful way to end the book. And he closed the book. And I was like, I have to ask her about place because that's just incredible. So I feel like your writing is very effective in communicating all of that.

[00:18:05] **Annette** Well, I appreciate that. And it kind of ties back to what you were asked about working with Silas. The end of the book changed a little bit just through conversations with Silas. It was almost like we were building up to the change throughout the editing process. It seemed natural at the end that some of the changes were made. But I have a good writer friend, Jeremy B. Jones, from the area. And every time I would see him at an event or something, he would say, "Are you sick of your book yet? Are you sick of your book yet?" Because he knew I was in the editing process. And I kept saying, "No, I'm not. I'm not." And I think part of it was because I was almost . . . I was reworking toward the end of it through the editing process, so it still felt new even by the end of the editing process to me. It wasn't major shifts. But, you know, as you kind of mentioned, it pulled together that sense of place. It really felt right at the end.

[00:19:05] **Kendra** It was just beautiful. And one of the things that I really loved about your book is that it looks at Asheville. And I am not from the South, but I moved to Greenville, South Carolina. And so Asheville's about an hour, hour and a half (depending on traffic) north of me. And so I've been there. And so, you know, I could see a few different places. And Asheville's so quirky. It has this, you know, weird, like, surreal kind of history to it. And your book is set during World War Two. And a lot of diplomats and their families are

"guests" at this historic inn. What drew you to setting your novel during this time period when, you know, these diplomats were being held prisoner, essentially, in this inn in Asheville, North Carolina, of all places?

[00:19:56] **Annette** I had seen an article in the Asheville Citizen Times newspaper about the time that the movie "Monuments Men" came out that was talking about the Biltmore Estate, which is one of the Vanderbilts's grandiose homes. And it had held artwork during World War Two safely. It's kind of the same topic as "Monuments Men" had covered. And anyway, so the newspaper article was talking about the Biltmore House and that artwork, but it also had this brief little mention that the Grove Park Inn held Axis diplomats as prisoners of war one summer on the estate of the Grove Park.

[00:20:48] **Annette** So that really fascinated me because immediately I started thinking about citizenship and identity and how you can go from being a diplomat to a prisoner of war in a very short period of time. It also reminded me that some Japanese internment camps during World War Two were set up on Indian reservations out west. And I've always found that to be really interesting, how citizenship and identity crisscross landscape. And so I thought, you know, Cherokee today is just an hour away from Asheville. Of course, in 1942 it took a little bit longer to get there. But it is still relatively close proximity. And Native Americans have always had a very tenuous citizenship rights within the United States. So I knew that the setting of a wartime, of an upper-class resort of foreign diplomats, and then you take—in this case—two Native Americans, and you mix it all together, and there has to be discussion about race and identity and citizenship that will have to take place. So the setting really drove everything because it really was a catalyst for talking about those issues.

[00:22:28] **Kendra** I feel like it's almost one of those things that is like, did this really. . . ? It seems so wild and far fetched, the idea that they might do this. But then it's like truth is stranger than fiction in a lot of ways. Was there any particular research that you did for the book on this topic and time period?

[00:22:50] **Annette** I did some, but I was unable to find a lot of information specifically about Grove Park Inn during that period and what took place. There's one book out that is like the history of the Grove Park Inn that has a section in there about basically just confirming that they held Axis diplomats as prisoners of war. There really isn't a whole lot of information on it on that particular site. Most of my research was on the time period in the region. So what the landscape looked like, researching what products were available, you know, for district detail sake, what . . . you know . . . really trying to understand the relationship of race, experiences of Cherokee people in this region at that time, you know, what it might have felt like? And so I did. . . . A good portion of my research was looking at photos. I get a lot of information from just looking at photos I could find. But to my knowledge, there's very little out there that specifically talks about the the diplomats that were at the Grove Park.

[00:24:14] **Kendra** It sounds like a great master's thesis project for a history student somewhere.

[00:24:22] **Annette** Yes.

[00:24:22] **Kendra** I found that part absolutely fascinating. And, you know, you mentioned that it's set during World War Two. And Cowney is not serving in the military, partially because of he has a disability. And so I wanted to ask you about that because as

someone with a disability, I feel like I rarely see other characters with disabilities on the page as a fully fleshed out, you know, well-rounded characters. And not only is Cowney incredibly well rounded and well written, he also has a visible disability, which I feel like it is often even more marginalized than those of us with invisible disability. So what was your process of writing Cowney's experience, having a disability? And were there any particular challenges that you had while you were writing his character?

[00:25:18] **Annette** Yeah, I appreciate that question. You're actually the first person who's brought that up, and I've had several interviews. So, you know, I think when I was thinking about Cowney, it came very natural to me that he would be dealing with some kind of disability. And I don't remember, you know, the moment that it kind of struck me exactly what it would be, except that I wanted it to stifle him literally from moving with great speed, but metaphorically, he's trying to make that decision. Right? Like where he wants to go, what direction he wants to go in, and how quickly he wants to get there. So the disability is both literal and figurative for Cowney.

[00:26:13] **Annette** And I, you know, a lot of times while I was writing, it was out of my mind that he had a disability because it doesn't affect every aspect of his life. But certainly when I was editing, you know, and early on, I would have to remember how it would affect him. For example, you know, if he's running through the woods, it's going to affect him differently than somebody without that disability. But, you know, I like that you can be reading the book and completely forget that that is part of him. You know, it doesn't define him, but a lot of it is a factor in his confidence. And as a child, it's—I don't want to give away spoilers either—but some family members refer to it and make him feel a certain way about his own existence. But I think that long term, it affected his confidence and hopefully he overcomes that.

[00:27:15] **Kendra** I think you mentioning how it also has a metaphorical meaning is a great example of what he's, you know, his life and what he's trying to do. And he's from a certain family situation which—again, dancing around spoilers—where I feel like that also kind of has stalled where he wants to go in life. And he's trying to figure that out. And I really liked how this is a summer story. There's something beautiful about a story that takes place over a single summer that changes someone's life. And I know I had that as a college-age person, and it was really beautiful seeing that on the page in this way. And that, you know, is an important part of Cowney's story. I mean, Cowney could have been, I guess, hypothetically, a wide-range of different ages. What drew you to having him be a young person at this sort of crossroads in his life?

[00:28:16] **Annette** There were a few pragmatic reasons just in terms of a timeline that I really had to stretch the timeline of his familial relationships. And, you know, when he was born and events' occurrence, so that was part of it. But really, you know, as I mentioned, I teach high school. And so I have a soft spot for teenage boys who are trying to figure out what they're going to do with their life. And they have certain sparks that might not completely catch fire in the high-school classroom. Right? You know that they're going to be all right in the end, but they might struggle, you know, in a classroom or something like that. So I've always. . . . I have an older brother that reminds me a lot of characters like this who just take a little while to become who they're meant to be. And so I think that that's what it is. You know, that my teaching background. And you know that I teach high school age kids. And it's really an incredible experience to see a student in your classroom who may not have it all together, but you know has a spark to them and then see them a few years later in the real world, so to speak. And they're just given remarkable things because everything finally came together for them.

[00:29:44] **Kendra** You mentioned high school and people trying to figure out who they are. And I feel like this definitely is that age where you change the most, oftentimes, in your life. And so I felt that his thought process and other characters who were similar age, and they're trying to figure out their lives. . . . It was really interesting to see all of those characters together and to compare and contrast them. And maybe I'm just still thinking as it regards to, like, paper topics for studying literature. But I really enjoyed seeing those foils there and seeing him figure things out for himself because he really is just kind of wandering around and trying to figure it out. And all of this stuff happens in his life in a single summer. But it does give him direction, which I don't know. I just found that . . . I found that fascinating. And it makes me want to go back and reread it and kind of like make notes and track things now. So I definitely need to do that in the future.

[00:30:51] **Kendra** So one of the things I've seen talked about your book a lot is that, to your knowledge, this is the first novel written by an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. What has that process it been like? And what conversations have you had that have started because you've been working on this project and and publishing it and it kind of being a landmark work of literature?

[00:31:18] **Annette** Yeah. So when I was writing it, there was at no point in time did I think, "Oh, this will be the first published novel of a member of the Eastern Band. It was really after signing the contract and everything that I started thinking about it and doublechecked to make sure I hadn't missed anything. But I get the question all the time. . . . Prior to even this book, I get the question all the time, can I recommend . . . number one, can I recommend Native writers? Which is fairly easy to do. Not as easy as I'd like it to be. But you know, who are some great Native writers? And I could do that. And then I'm asked to recommend Cherokee writers, specifically Cherokee novelists. And I can do that to a certain extent. There's at least a few names because there's the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, who has several published novelists. And there's also the United Keetoowah Band, which is the other fairly recognized Cherokee tribe in the country. But then I'm often asked the question, can you recommend Eastern Band writers? And I can to some extent identify some short stories or poetry or essays that some Eastern Band writers have had published, but very few, even in those other genres. And I always just have to look at people and say, "There's not an Eastern Band novelist. I can't give you a name." And so it's nice to at least be able to give one name now. But it's also, you know, I also want to be careful in that, you know, I am just one voice from this tribe. And I certainly hope to represent my tribe authentically and honestly. I also know that I'm not the only perspective from our tribe. And I certainly hope I'm not the only voice, novelist voice, for long. I hope that there are many others because all communities, all cultures are complex. And there's no way that my voice could represent all that.

[00:33:52] **Kendra** I'm sure there are upcoming artists and things coming out of those projects. Are there anywhere that you would recommend that listeners check out to see what Cherokee Nation artists are doing or organizations that are working with that? Because I'm sure there's a lot of great work coming out of the region.

[00:34:14] **Annette** Well, you know, there's kind of two questions there. One in terms of Cherokee, more broadly speaking . . . so Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma or United Keetoowah Band, also in Oklahoma. And certainly there are artists coming out of those spaces and the Eastern Band as well. You know, there's certain publications that I think the general public may be less aware of. It's like "Indian Country Today," "Native Peoples Magazine" . . . you know, those kinds of publications are dedicated to issues of Native

peoples and may not be on everybody's radar. You know, it's still difficult to name a source of really where to find Native writers collectively. The Institute of American Indian Art has a low-res program that a lot of great writers are coming out of. And, you know, checking out to see who is involved with them is a good start. I will say there's a great novel coming out right now as well from the Cherokee Nation. It is called CROOKED HALLELUJAH. And she is a woman from the Cherokee Nation, the author of that book. Yeah, so it's difficult for me to just say, oh, yes, go to this organization's website, and you'll find out lots of information . . . because that's part of the problem. You know, it's difficult to identify emerging Native artists as a collective and specifically for Eastern Band Cherokee. I would recommend to the Cherokee author Kelli Jo Ford. Her new novel out is CROOKED HALLELUJAH, and it's gotten a lot of great reviews.

[00:36:20] **Kendra** Well, before I let you go, I love to ask people we have on the podcast, what books are you reading right now and loving? Or are there any books in general that you would recommend in addition to, I guess in this case, Kelli Jo Ford's book that we've already mentioned?

[00:36:40] **Annette** Yeah. This is a time of so many incredible books, especially by regional authors that are out right now. I'm actually reading Carter Sickels's THE PRETTIEST STAR—you and I had talked about this earlier, before the podcast—which I had picked up a little while ago. But I have this stack of regional writers that I'm just trying to work my way through. So I just started it, and I'm loving that. There is a book called THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN, which is a horror novel. And I don't ever read horror. But I had heard really good things about that. And so I read that book just recently and really enjoyed it as well and kind of a little break into that genre. And then I read earlier an advanced copy, but I wanted to mention it because it's out now. David Joy's novel WHEN THESE MOUNTAINS BURN was really great. And I did read it a little bit earlier. But wanted to mention it because it's just out now. And then one more that I just finished . . . another regional author, Leah Hampton, has a short story collection out. And its title is one that I don't know if I can say on your podcast. So you're laughing because you know what the title is, right?

[00:38:21] **Kendra** Yes. Yes.

[00:38:22] **Annette** Okay.

[00:38:24] **Kendra** When she was on the podcast, we just went for F*CKFACE AND OTHER STORIES because. . . .

[00:38:31] **Annette** Okay, there you go. F*CKFACE AND OTHER STORIES by Leah Hampton. I'm going to teach at least one of those stories in my classroom because it is such a great example of the craft of short story and just really great humor in her writing. So I've been reading a lot, trying to keep up with everything. But those are a few that come to mind immediately.

[00:38:59] **Kendra** Well, thank you for those recommendations, and thank you for coming and talking about your book today. I feel very honored. And I'm so grateful that you were up for coming on the podcast.

[00:39:10] **Annette** Yes, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed it.

[00:39:16] **Kendra** I'd like to give my heartfelt thanks to Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle for talking with me about her debut novel, *EVEN AS WE BREATHE*, which is out now from the University Press of Kentucky. You can find her on Twitter (@abirdsaun13) and on Instagram (@annette_saunooke_clapsaddle), both of which will be linked in our show notes, as well as her website. And that's asaunookeclapsaddle.com. And, of course, all of the rest of her information will be linked in our show notes. I'd like to give a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. You can find Reading Women at readingwomenpodcast.com and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). And thanks so much for listening.