

Interview with Crystal Wilkinson

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Crystal Wilkinson about her latest book, PERFECT BLACK, which is out now from the University Press of Kentucky. You can find a complete transcript of our conversation over on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:38] **Kendra** So I am a huge, huge fan of Crystal Wilkinson. I have a passion project called Read Appalachia, where I talk about books and writing from the Appalachian region. And Crystal Wilkinson is an Affrilachian Poet. And in our conversation, Crystal shares a lot about the Affrilachian Poet movement and how that influenced her writing. She is currently the poet laureate of Kentucky, which is fabulous. But she doesn't just write poetry. In fact, PERFECT BLACK is her first book of poetry, but she's already written a lot of fiction as well and some nonfiction. I recently read THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE, which I believe is her most recent novel. It is fabulous. There is just something so incredibly beautiful when a poet writes prose. And you can see all of these different selves of Crystal's writing nature coming together in this incredible novel. So I do ask her about that as well. The audiobook just came out recently for THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE. So if you are an audiobook listener like myself, you should definitely check it out. And of course, we do talk about her poetry and how this collection, PERFECT BLACK, has a lot of elements of memoir included in it as well.

[00:02:06] **Kendra** So a little bit more about Crystal Wilkinson before we get started. Like I mentioned, she's currently Kentucky's poet laureate. And she's the award winning author of PERFECT BLACK, THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE, WATER STREET, and BLACKBERRIES, BLACKBERRIES. She is the recipient of the 2021 O. Henry Prize, a 2020 USA Artist Fellowship, and the 2016 Ernest J. Gaines Prize for Literary Excellence. And she has so many other awards and honors. You can find those in our show notes. And she currently teaches at the University of Kentucky, where she is the associate professor of English in the MFA in creative writing program. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Crystal Wilkinson.

[00:02:50] **Kendra** All right, well, welcome, Crystal, to the podcast. I am over-the-moon excited to have you on.

[00:03:00] **Crystal** Thank you. It's good to be here.

[00:03:02] **Kendra** Well, today we are going to be talking about your most recent book, PERFECT BLACK. And I have a few questions about one of your previous titles as well. But I do want to check in with you and see how you're doing releasing this book during a pandemic when I guess more traditional means of marketing and connecting with readers is, you know, things are a bit different, I guess, to put it lightly.

[00:03:28] **Crystal** Certainly. Yeah. It's been . . . it's been wild. It certainly hasn't been the way that we planned. We thought that by this time things would have calmed down, and I could have done more in-person events. So including my first large event to launch, we've canceled them all or made them all virtual. So I think one of my dear friends, Kiese Laymon, who's a nonfiction writer, was one of the first people I knew that released a book during a pandemic and sort of helped start this idea of conversations with people. So I think that's one way that we've been promoting the book, which I love—instead of having

all of these readings, virtually having a lot of conversations with people. And I've really been enjoying doing that.

[00:04:21] **Kendra** You've had a great line up on your virtual tour and so many fabulous opportunities to listen in on these conversations. And, you know, I've always lived in the middle of nowhere or on the edge of nowhere. And I've never had the opportunity to go into a lot of these book events. But now, because they're virtual, people can access them from wherever they are, which has been really nice to be able to, you know, connect with particularly literature from Appalachia—for me anyway.

[00:04:51] **Crystal** Yes, that's been . . . that's been great and great for people in the region and outside the region to be able to to come to events and panels and talks.

[00:05:03] **Kendra** And so PERFECT BLACK is your first full-length poetry collection, but you've been writing poetry for a long time. So kind of how was the journey to coming to put out this this collection? And how did you come to the conclusion that now was the time?

[00:05:23] **Crystal** You know, I think a lot of it was just sort of organic, that it should happen now. I have been writing poetry for a long time. I guess, in some ways, poetry was a first love, although I would put storytelling up there with it—not necessarily writing fiction, but storytelling was a love. And finding ways to sort of pair them has always been one of my great sort of haunts as a writer. And so after THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE. . . . And I'm glad that you want to talk about both books because I think that BIRDS OF OPULENCE enabled me to be able to publish PERFECT BLACK. And what I mean by that is BIRDS OF OPULENCE was the first book of mine where I decided that my poet self and my fiction writer self, or my prose self, didn't have to be separate entities, that it was perfectly fine for me to combine those into the writer that I am now at this time in my life. So after doing that, I felt more prepared to allow my poems in the world. Like I said, I've always written poetry. And I've always loved poetry. And I've continued to write poetry over the years, but I've always sort of tucked them away. Maybe some of them have been published a little bit here and there, a poem at a time. But I never thought of having my own volume of poetry. So those were the beginning steps.

[00:06:58] **Crystal** The other thing that I'll say about my poetry is that I've always felt like, you know, not all poets. . . . You know, I teach poetry, and there's always this idea of the speaker of the poem and not the writer themselves. But once I made peace with the fact that these are very autobiographical poems, that this is basically a memoir in verse, then I also had to deal with how that made me feel and how vulnerable that made me feel to sort of be outside of my comfort zone—which, you know, in fiction, I get a great joy. . . . In fiction, I get this great joy of having some threads of truth sort of threaded through. But the reader doesn't necessarily know. Sometimes, I don't even know directly that there's this little thread of me there. And then I layer the fiction on. But with poetry, the way that I have written these poems, there's a much thicker thread of truth that I felt left me sort of exposed and left me vulnerable. So that's something. . . . That's a new experience for me that I'm dealing with.

[00:08:07] **Kendra** Then they're so insightful—and the listeners can't see this, but there are tabs all along my copy of PERFECT BLACK—and I love to see recurring themes. And I don't know if it's like the grad student literature student in me or what, but I love being able to make those connections, particularly when reading several books by the same author. And I loved how you have these moments in your poems where you'll describe something distinct about someone. And in those like two lines, you learn not only like a

visual aspect of them, but you know something about their character. And I was looking in *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*. And Joe in particular, you always have him standing around doing something. And there's the line about him doing something, and you learn something about what he's doing, what he looks like doing that thing, but also something about his character. And I love what you said about *BIRDS OF OPULENCE*, how your poet self and your fiction self kind of merged together because those aspects come together so beautifully in the book. But then you can also see those aspects in *PERFECT BLACK* in the way that you describe the characters in your poetry collection.

[00:09:24] **Crystal** Interesting. Well, I mean, I think part of that goes . . . you're talking about your literature student self. I think part of it is probably my professor in me when I'm teaching fiction. That's one of the things that I recommend is that a writer not only knows what a character looks like—which is the first, I think, line of characterization that they go to—but to also remember that their character is a human being and they have a body and think about what they're doing with their body while the story is still sort of swirling on around them. So that's an awareness that I hope that I carry with me throughout my work to make sure that the bodies are . . . the humans are embodied, that they have a physicality. And of course, in these rural areas, somebody is always doing something. No matter what's spinning. They're washing clothes. They're planting food. They're harvesting food. They're feeding cows.

[00:10:30] **Kendra** I loved in *BIRDS OF OPULENCE* how there was so much just. . . . There were descriptions of food and of care. And you have multiple generations of women in *BIRDS OF OPULENCE* and different families as well. And they all come together in so many different ways. There's a scene where the matriarch of the family and her daughter are sitting on the front porch steps, and then another member is sitting to the side, listening in on this conversation. And you realize how complex the dynamic is between these characters. And it's just little moments like that that end up being a huge part, or a bigger part, in these characters' lives. And you just find this unique aspect of the everyday interactions between these women. And I felt that also in *PERFECT BLACK* when you describe, you know, the relationship between the different women in the book as well.

[00:11:34] **Crystal** Yeah, I think, you know, I'm sort of. . . . My idea of kitchen ghost are, you know, there's a through line from *BIRDS OF OPULENCE* to *PERFECT BLACK*, and then that through line will continue in the new book I'm writing called *PRAISE SONG FOR THE KITCHEN GHOST*, which comes from that line in *PERFECT BLACK*, from that lyric essay in *PERFECT BLACK*. And so I do like to think about what the various generations of women are passing along to one another. So, of course, there are these moments where there's lessons being taught. Like, this is how you can the tomatoes. This is how you do this. But there's also—particularly for girls, I think—things are passed on from our mothers and our grandmothers and our great grandmothers and our aunties through our own observations about when we were watching them deal with the travesty of their lives or love and tenderness or the opposite of that. And I wanted to portray that both in *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE* and in *PERFECT BLACK*.

[00:12:49] **Kendra** I was like, "Kitchen Ghost" would also be a great title of this book. I wonder if, like, during an iteration, like, "Kitchen Ghost" had been there. But it's such an incredible image that encapsulates a lot of the themes in the book. And my grandmother on the Appalachian side of my family is in hospice. And so I was reading through a bunch of her letters and different things while I was reading this book. And there's that connection there that you feel this is something incredibly personal that these characters are going through. And then we move to *PERFECT BLACK* where it's more autobiographical. You

can feel that, that you are going through that process. This is a process that women go through of understanding where they come from and then thinking about what they're going to leave behind.

[00:13:38] **Crystal** Mm hmm. And there's also that sort of crossroads, which, again, I covered in *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE* because, you know, in *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*, I'm talking a lot about this African concept of Sankofa, which has to do with, you know, I think the literal translation is "go back and catch it, go back and fetch it." But it has to do with what ancestrally are you . . . moves forward with you and what you sort of choose to leave behind. You know, in the case of *BIRDS OF OPULENCE*, what moves forward with you? What's in the blood? Mental illness—is that something you can leave behind? Probably not, since it's carried in the blood. But you can leave behind sort of dysfunction and sort of a pathology in the family and decide that your generation is going to be different. So I think some of those concepts are carried forward into the poetry collection, into *PERFECT BLACK*.

[00:14:40] **Kendra** So after you wrote *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*, and that was out into the world—and we've talked a bit about how there's those through lines in *PERFECT BLACK*. . . . Were these poems written simultaneously, some of them, while you were writing *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*? Or was this just something that you were still thinking about and you wanted to address in a different way than you'd had in the novel?

[00:15:02] **Crystal** Yeah, I mean, I think every writer has their haunts, you know, things that they . . . ideas that recur, things that sort of gnaw at them. And I think I discovered some of them or more of them when I wrote *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*. And a lot of the poems that appear in *PERFECT BLACK* are poems that I wrote decades ago. And so what was interesting is to sort of lay them out like lily pads and begin to look at them. And it was also sort of daunting and frightening to sort of pair them with . . . looking at the new poems that I had written and looking at those old poems and actually seeing the same themes and seeing a trajectory. So I discovered a lot about myself in writing and compiling *PERFECT BLACK* because some of the poems are new, some of them are older. But when I put them side-by-side and begin to look at things thematically and look at through lines, you know, there they were. There were my haunts again, those things that I sort of concern myself with over and over again, matriarchal lineage. You know, I think the whole first part of *PERFECT BLACK* is about girlhood. So you see that also reflected in *THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE*. The second part of the book is more about sort of a political coming of age and activist coming of age. And then the third section is more of a, you know, sort of autobiographically what I'm about now and womanhood and some about social justice and food and some of those other themes.

[00:16:52] **Kendra** I loved how there's this entire poem about food, and food is heritage, and how that is something that women pass on to each other, and taking that symbolism and carrying it through these different ideas. I've never seen that before. But I think it is perfection. And I wish more people would do similar things because food is such an important part of a culture and passing down knowledge. And I think. . . . I mean, I love food writing. I have a whole collection of food writing, different things. Like I just collect everything I can find because of how important it is. And I'm going to quit gushing about food. I am so sorry.

[00:17:43] **Crystal** That's wonderful. Don't stop gushing about food. That's what keeps us alive. We all should think about that more about, you know, not just about eating, but

where food comes from and what the heritage is behind the preparation of a dish and those sort of things.

[00:18:00] **Kendra** My grandmother has a recipe for seven-day pickles, which I still have not gotten my hands on. I'll have to go to my aunt and be like, "Hi."

[00:18:09] **Crystal** You need that.

[00:18:09] **Kendra** I do. I do. I'm obsessed with all things pickled. And my dad does not know the recipe, bless his heart. And so he only knows the recipe for biscuits. And I'm like, okay, but you need all of them. You know, like, it was just something that I feel like a lot of folks might miss in looking at a culture is those handing down of the recipes. And the gathering together culturally around food is such an important part of a lot of storytelling, particularly I think of all the picnics in THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE and all the shenanigans going around a Sunday get-together. And you have your potluck. And you know, everyone's fussing over their dishes and different things like that.

[00:18:58] **Crystal** Yeah, I mean, I think food is. . . . You know, we talk about, you know, particularly about Appalachia, and we talk about, of course, the voice. We talk about the accent. We talk about the landscape. We talk about what the work, you know, whether it's coal mining or it's tobacco or what kind of work is involved in or industries involved in the region. But I think food is equally an important part of culture that identifies a particular place, that makes that place unique. And so I think food heritage is important too.

[00:19:32] **Kendra** But I wanted to chat with you also about Appalachian heritage in writing and about Affrilachian literature in particular. You've been writing with Affrilachian writers for a long time. And so for our listeners who might not be from the United States or maybe not from the region, could you talk a little bit about your experience writing as part of that writing group, how maybe that might have affected your work going forward? Because I feel like you can feel the different fingerprints over your work. I mean, Nikky Finney did the introduction for your poetry collection, so I thought that was pretty cool.

[00:20:14] **Crystal** Yeah. Yeah, sure. Yeah. You know, Nikky is a dear friend and also a writer that I admire and was one of those founding mothers of the of the Affrilachian Poets. And Frank X Walker coined the phrase about thirty years ago. Whew, thirty years seems like a. . . . It's hard to believe it's been that long, but it has been. So he had gone to a reading that was, you know, some of the best writing in Appalachia, you know, Appalachia with the P's. And I think Nikky was the only African American writer that had been invited. So he went. And he looked up the definition of Appalachia, and it said, "white people indigenous to the Appalachian region." So, of course, him being a poet, that got him to thinking about what that means and what does that mean for Black people who lived in the areas? Or even people of other cultures? What did that mean if the very definition of Appalachia said "white people indigenous to the mountainous region." So he replaced the P's with the F's. And I'm not sure if his poem "Affrilachia" with the F's came out first, or if it was just the idea that he brought back to the group.

[00:21:42] **Crystal** There was a small group before I joined them that was already gathered together and writing together. But by the time I came along and became one of the founding members, they had already called it the Affrilachian Poets. It was already called that. And for me, what it did was give me a place, a sense of belonging. You know, a place where my back could be straight about all the pieces of who I am, about my Black self and my rural self and my country self and my Appalachian self in one place. When

before, you know, I felt totally comfortable going to an Appalachian event. And, you know, more times than not, I would be the only Black person there. So there was something missing. And then I would go to Black events sometime, and I would be sort of the only . . . sort of rural-based person there. So working with the Affrilachian Poets and them sort of having the same sort of collective ideas and sort of the same sort of collective memory gave me a comfortable place in which to write. I felt like I was heard. I felt like the particular culture that I came out of was held up a little higher. So I think it gave us a place to affirm who we are. If I'm speaking for myself, it gave me a place to affirm who I was, to also give myself permission to write the stories and the poems that I was writing, another place to have community, another place to have family, a place to be . . . where my work was critiqued and taken seriously, sort of outside of the academic realm.

[00:23:44] **Crystal** You know, we were—and still are—a group that loved one another fiercely, sort of as friends. We've been together to see births of children and marriages and divorces and deaths of elders. But when it came to the work, it was always taken very seriously. And they were very honest in their critique of the work. And so I think that collectively, all of our work moved forward during that time, you know. And probably without the group, none of us would have been pushed as much because it was not a group that was just a love fest. Sometimes these writing groups are like, oh, yeah, that's great; that's so good; you're great. And of course, there was some of that. We loved on each other. But it wasn't exclusively just that. We went hard on the work so that we could each improve and take it to the next level. So it was phenomenal in my growth as a writer.

[00:24:54] **Kendra** There's a poem in PERFECT BLACK where you talk about your country self and how that is an integral part of who you are and how you were all of these different things. And the country is also one of those things. And it just made me think about the other Affrilachian poetry that I've read and how Affrilachian Poets created this space so you could create this amazing poetry. And it's such an incredible part of Appalachian literature. And I am. . . . I don't think you can have Appalachian literature without the Affrilachian Poets. And the fact that there's just so many, and it's so vibrant, and it's ongoing—there are now young Affrilachian writers, like, doing the thing and putting out work. And I think that is just a fabulous heritage. I think that goes back to passing on the torch and this idea of where you come from and in that, that you have in your work, you can also see that on a macro scale with Affrilachian literature as a whole.

[00:25:59] **Crystal** Yeah, I mean, I think it was important to all of us and all of our work going forward, it's such an interesting group. Like you said, there's some younger people. There are some older people. Some of us are academics. Some of us are, you know, managers at Kroger's. Some of us are performers. There's like a whole sort of array of a variety of people who were drawn together by the word, really. Not "the Word" as in the biblical word, but drawn together around writing and how powerful telling a story can be.

[00:26:43] **Kendra** And now you are Kentucky's poet laureate, so people are obviously getting on board. And Frank X. Walker was also Kentucky's poet laureate at some point as well.

[00:26:56] **Crystal** Yes.

[00:26:56] **Kendra** So you all are . . . you all are, just, killing it. Like, I just love that for you. And when they announced that you were going to be the next Kentucky's best poet laureate, I was like, yes! I was like, "Go big blue!" That has nothing to do with poet laureates, but I don't know what else to wear. I need some sort of, like, merch to dress

myself in for poetry or something. But I was very excited. And congratulations. That's fantastic.

[00:27:21] **Crystal** Thank you. Thank you.

[00:27:23] **Kendra** Well, you mentioned that the through line of these two books is moving forward with your latest work. Is there anything that you can tell us about your current project? I don't want to jinx it or anything, but I wanted to ask you about that.

[00:27:39] **Crystal** Yeah, it's a . . . it is a book about food ways. It's a book that traces my matriarchal lineage through food and sort of starts with me and my mother's inability to cook and then goes all the way back to the furthest ancestor that I could find, which is Aggy of Color, who was born in Virginia in 1795 and brought as an enslaved woman to Kentucky. And so it has lots of lyric essays in it that cover a long span of time and sort of document food ways.

[00:28:20] **Kendra** Reminds me of the cooking gene by Michael W. Twitty, where he did. . .

[00:28:25] **Crystal** Yeah, Michael Twitty. Yeah, yeah. That's a book that I love. But it's probably more like Miss Edna's book, sort of a contemporary version of Miss Edna's book. What was her book. . . ? Oh, that one's IN PURSUIT OF FLAVOR. But probably Edna Lewis's book, the first one that I can't remember the name of. But it sort of goes through the seasons in Appalachia and what the women would be doing. And then there are recipes that accompany . . . recipes, as told by my grandmother, that accompany each chapter.

[00:29:07] **Kendra** So it really is like that long piece in PERFECT BLACK, just like a whole book of it.

[00:29:12] **Crystal** It is. Yeah.

[00:29:12] **Kendra** Oh, this is just making my day. This is making my day. I'm just going to sign me up wherever the preorder button is. Well, the last question I have for you is what other books would you recommend to our listeners if they're interested in learning more about Appalachian culture or maybe similar types of storytelling that you use in your work?

[00:29:38] **Crystal** Well, I would recommend. . . . One of the things I would recommend is Nikky Finney's work. Her latest book is called LOVE CHILD'S HOTBED OF OCCASIONAL POETRY, which is a lot about her father. So there's a sort of an autobiographical thread through those with some artifacts from her family. It's a wonderful treasure trove of a book. And THE SECRET LIVES OF CHURCH LADIES by Deesha Philyaw, I really have enjoyed that book. And I think she's been surprised how much we've embraced her. I think living in Philadelphia, she didn't necessarily think of herself as an Appalachian or an Affrilachian. And we're like, oh, yes, you are. You're one of us. You know, come into the fold. And so it's been great getting to know her and reading her book.

[00:30:36] **Crystal** And there's just so many . . . I mean, there's so many Affrilachian Poets, too many to name, like Joy Priest, Frank X Walker, Kelly Norman Ellis, Keith Wilson, all great poets. And like I said, I know I've left out—Mitchell Douglas—I've left out several. There are just so many. This is a question that I find the most difficult in all of the land because I have to. . . . It's almost like taking a magnifying glass and holding it in

close. So right now I'm holding it in close over Affrilachia to recommend. But if I pull it back, it's going to just like explode because there's so many . . . so many good books, and more and more coming out every day. We used to own a bookstore. And so it's sort of a thing. . . . I probably have. . . . Someone I was on Zoom with earlier had said, "Oh, your background looks like a bookstore." And me and my husband used to own a bookstore, and so I do set it up sometimes like we would have in the bookstore. But I probably. . . . We probably have three thousand books in this house.

[00:31:50] **Kendra** I believe it. I married a guy in my writing program. So I mean, that is. . . .

[00:31:57] **Crystal** Oh, yes. Yes.

[00:32:01] **Kendra** So I will be sure to link the folks you mentioned down in the show notes. And also, that gives me lots of leads for Read Appalachia, which makes me very excited. But thank you so much for talking with me today, Crystal. I am just so overjoyed. I'm not supposed to play favorites, but you are a huge favorite of mine. And so thank you for chatting with me.

[00:32:23] **Crystal** Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me. It's been such a delight to talk to you.

[00:32:29] **Kendra** And that's our show. I'd like to thank Crystal Wilkinson for talking with me about her poetry collection, PERFECT BLACK, and her novel, THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE, both of which are now out from the University Press of Kentucky. You can find her on crystalwilkenson.net and on Instagram (@crystalwilki), both of which will, of course, be linked in our show notes. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester. Our music is by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks so much for listening.