

Interview with Jenny Lawson

[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 Jenny Lawson about her essay collection, *BROKEN (IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY)*, which is out now from Henry Holt. 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** Now, I first discovered Jenny Lawson back in grad school. I was a young, chronically ill person. And finding her memoir, *LET'S PRETEND THIS NEVER HAPPENED*, was just a delight. It was one of the first essay collections that I read that perfectly captured the dark humor that you begin to cultivate when you have a chronic condition. I really love the way that Jenny describes her odd growing-up years. I had a lot of similar experiences with quirky family members, we might say. So I really loved her book. And, you know, this Pride Month, I really wanted to feature some queer authors. And Jenny Lawson is bisexual and talks about that experience in her first book in particular. And so I really love that part of her work as well. Her latest book, *BROKEN (IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY)*, is a collection of essays where Jenny Lawson really delves into what it's like with her experience having a mental illness and the different treatments that she does for that. Also, of course, very humorous descriptions of her family life and the things that happen to her. I am a huge fan of her and find her incredibly encouraging, as a chronically ill person myself. And to see someone who is able to do things in their own fashion—as a disabled person—is incredibly important kinds of representation to have.

[00:02:15] **Kendra** So a little bit about Jenny Lawson before we jump into the interview. Jenny is an award-winning humorist known for her candor in sharing her struggle with mental illness. She lives in Texas with her husband and daughter and was constantly "buying too many books" (Not a real thing, she insists), so she decided to skip the middleman and just started her own bookshop, which serves booze because books and booze are what magic is made of. She previously has written *LET'S PRETEND THIS NEVER HAPPENED* and *FURIOUSLY HAPPY*, both of which were number one New York Times best sellers. She also wrote *YOU ARE HERE*, which inexplicably made it onto the *New York Times* best seller list in spite of the fact that it was basically a very fun coloring book. She would like to be your friend unless you're a real asshole. And yes, she realizes that this whole paragraph is precisely the reason she shouldn't be allowed to write her own bio. So that should give you a little taste of Lawson's humor and her wonderful way of describing things. But without further ado, here is my conversation with the wonderful Jenny Lawson.

[00:03:32] **Kendra** Welcome, Jenny, to the podcast. I'm so excited to have you on today.

[00:03:37] **Jenny** I'm so excited to be here. Yay!

[00:03:39] **Kendra** I really loved your books. And I have Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, which causes migraines. And so I listen solely to audiobooks to be able to read. And I love your audiobooks. They're just wonderful.

[00:03:55] **Jenny** That's so nice. You know, I can't listen to them because I don't like the sound of my own voice like everyone else. But it's always so nice when people are like, "You drove across the country with me!" Or, "I sleep with you every night!" And I'm like, You do what? Oh. No, no, I get it. No, I understand now.

[00:04:14] **Kendra** So how has this adventure that is the pandemic been for you in regards to. . . . Well, I mean, you started a . . . you were about to open a bookstore, I believe, right before the pandemic hit. So I imagine it was, I don't know, a time to problem solve when you're trying to open a bookstore during a time when people can't come actually into the store.

[00:04:40] **Jenny** Yeah, you know. I was like, hmm, let's see, how do you make money? Let's open an independent bookshop! In the middle of a pandemic! That's exactly what to do. Yeah, we did everything wrong. Yeah, it was about a week before we were about to open was when the state got shut down. And so, yeah, we have not . . . we really . . . we still aren't really open to customers because we just want to make sure that everybody is really safe. And so, yeah, so we do like curbside. And we ship and stuff and. But I mean, it's been more than a year, and we're still doing well because people are supporting the bookshop. So that's really good. And in a way, it was very helpful because, you know, until I got vaccinated—because I have a lot of autoimmune problems—I couldn't . . . I could not leave the house. I couldn't go grocery shopping. We were very, very, very quarantine-y. But I would go on Sunday to the bookshop and be like, well, I cannot leave my house for anything else. But I have a whole bookshop that I get to go through and just steal all the books—although my husband keeps saying, "You're not actually stealing them if you own them." But it still feels like stealing. But it feels like really sort of. . . . And I'm just like, "Oh, look at all these books I'm stealing." He's like, "Again, we're paying for those. But sure, whatever you want."

[00:06:09] **Kendra** It makes it more of an adventure for stealing them. You know?

[00:06:13] **Jenny** Exactly! Right?

[00:06:14] **Kendra** It gives you that, like, rogue feeling you got when you kept your library book too long.

[00:06:19] **Jenny** Yes, exactly. Exactly.

[00:06:24] **Kendra** I've always wanted to ask you about how you started writing books. And I believe you blogged for a while before that. So can you tell us the story of your blog and how that, you know, started your journey to publishing the books that you have?

[00:06:41] **Jenny** So I have always been extremely anxious and introverted. And I have anxiety disorder and depression, all of that. And so that sort of keeps me from being—I would say like—overly friendly. I tend to stay home a lot. I don't tend to communicate to people, but when I do, I do it through writing. That's my easy way to communicate. I've always written. But when I was in . . . when I lived in Houston, which is Texas and South, there was a parenting blog on the *Houston Chronicle* newspaper. And the woman who was writing it said, you know, I have to quit this because I don't think that you can be a good parent and also, you know, spend time blogging and everything. And I contacted the editor. And I was like, apparently I'm the bad parent because I'll do it. I'll do it for free. And he was like, "For free? You're hired." Except, I guess you're maybe not hired when you're doing it for free, but you know what I mean. And so I did that for a while. And I kept getting in trouble for cursing or saying things that were just, you know, slightly offensive. Like, not mean, but just questionable for a very conservative sort of newspaper. And so I decided to start my blog, The Bloggess. Then years after that, I wrote my first book, LET'S PRETEND THIS NEVER HAPPENED, and I never stopped blogging. This is. . . . My fourth book just

came out. And I am still . . . I think I might be one of the only people from the old-school blogging world who is still continuing to blog on a weekly basis.

[00:08:28] **Kendra** Oh, my goodness. And I love your writing style. It's very . . . it's very funny. It's very developed. You play with the text itself. So, like, when you're viewing the text, and it's very different. And it adds to that kind of vibe that you have going. How many years were you blogging before LET'S PRETEND THIS NEVER HAPPENED came out?

[00:08:49] **Jenny** Oh my gosh. Several. I would say maybe five or so? You know, I had been working on a book. But it was really a book just for my family. It was just like a collection of family stories. And I was like, I'm just going to write these down because I have like, literally, some really bad memory problems. And I thought, if I don't write these down, what if I don't remember them? And if I don't remember them, then how am I going to tell my kid one day these stories that maybe I may not remember? So I had started on that. I think I worked on that for like ten years before the book was actually ever published. So, you know, there's people—because it debuted number one on The New York Times list—and people were like, "She's an instant bestseller!" And I'm like, "Yeah, an overnight success that took ten years to write the book. So."

[00:09:45] **Kendra** Yeah, I can imagine I remember, V. E. Schwab, writing something similar, like working X amount of years, publishing how many books to be an instant success. Yeah, I don't think a lot of people realize how long books take sometimes.

[00:09:59] **Jenny** Yes. Unless you're like Stephen King. Stephen King is like, "Oh, I wrote a book on the plane. And here. And now it's published tomorrow." And I'm like, "Steven King, stop it! The rest of us, it takes years."

[00:10:12] **Kendra** And then he's like, Oh yeah, I like to say X amount of books ahead of schedule. And I'm like, who does that?

[00:10:18] **Jenny** Nobody does that. He sold his soul to the devil. That's all there is to it.

[00:10:22] **Kendra** I mean, that's very own brand for him though. So.

[00:10:25] **Jenny** I think so. I think it's fitting. Yeah that's good.

[00:10:29] **Kendra** I love his Corgis. Obviously, biased a little bit. And so he has Molly, the thing of evil. And Molly does terrible things all of the time just to watch people like sob in terror. And I appreciate that. She owns it. She knows who she is. Her dad is very proud of her, of course. So if you're going to be a thing of evil, having Stephen King as your father does make sense.

[00:10:53] **Jenny** Oh my god. It totally does. It totally does.

[00:10:56] **Kendra** Dylan's name is Dylan Excalibur, Lord of Winchester. He's very extra. Like very extra name for a very extra Corgi.

[00:11:03] **Jenny** I mean, with that name. Of course.

[00:11:05] **Kendra** Yeah, you know, lean into the Welsh and, you know, the English last name "Winchester" and just go for it. But he. . . . I will edit out all the noises that he is making during this recording, but he's very upset that I have closed the door.

[00:11:20] **Jenny** You should not edit them out. That's the best part. I mean, like on my audiobook, this last one, because I . . . Normally you would go to New York, and you're in like a studio. And you've got, you know, the producers there. And it's all like. . . . It's all very fancy. And it just feels very strange to me. And this year, or last year, because of a pandemic, they were like, "Okay, look, this is what you're going to do. You're going to record your audio book in your closet." And they were just so apologetic. They were like, "We're so sorry. It's just not a good idea for you to travel." And I was like, "Okay, number one, I completely agree, and I'm not traveling. And number two, I get to stay home and just sit in my closet with my cat on my lap and read a book? This is fantastic!" And I felt really bad because you could hear! You could hear like Hunter S. Tom Cat, you could hear his purring. And you could hear Dorothy Barker bark. But then I had all of these people who were like, "No, that was the best part! It felt like we were hiding in the closet with you for six hours while you read your book!" And I was like, "Well, you kind of were. So."

[00:12:28] **Kendra** Yeah, I definitely felt that when I was listening. And it just was very fitting for the book. You know? I really, really enjoyed that.

[00:12:36] **Kendra** So BROKEN is your latest book. And what was that like writing this book? You've already written two books. And I'm sure each book presents new challenges. So what was the challenge that you experienced writing this particular one?

[00:12:55] **Jenny** You know, I think the hardest thing on this—it was a couple of things. One was that I hit some very, very deep depressions when I was writing this book. And when I am depressed, I cannot write. And typically my depressions will usually last for a few days. But I have some that lasted for months. So I would have these periods of time where I would just be like, what is the point of my life if all I could do is just sit on the couch and survive the day? And of course, you know, depression is lying to you and telling you that you're a failure and that you'll never be good again. And so, you know, I tried to not listen to those voices in my head. That was a big challenge. But in a way, you know, it's kind of interesting because one of the things that I write about in BROKEN is about when I got really, really, really low and decided to do a repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation, which I always . . . I'm like, what is it called again? You know, I just was in such a dark place. I was like, I need to do something because I have treatment-resistant depression. And that just basically means that I tried all of the medications and all of the therapies—and they help; thank God for medication—but it's not enough for me. So, you know, when I started doing TMS and . . . You know, all of a sudden, I was like, well, I guess if nothing else, it'll be something to write about. And it was! So I think part of it was actually getting into the mental ability to write.

[00:14:40] **Jenny** And the other thing is, I have a bit of a problem with whatever it is I'm writing about, I have a tendency to sort of self immerse. And so sometimes I would want to write about, you know, depression or anxiety. And I try to. . . . My books are. . . . Like, I want them. . . . They're humor books. I want people to like them and think that they're funny. Even if they don't have any of the things that I talk about, I want them to still be like, "Oh, this is still funny. This is still interesting." But when I am writing some of the more serious stuff about mental illness, sometimes I can feel myself being pulled into, you know, either. . . . If you write about anxiety, sometimes it can cause you to have an anxiety attack. Or same thing with depression, if you write about it for too long, sometimes it can . . . you can find yourself falling into those pits. So that was a big thing. It was just giving myself time, I think, to be like, it's okay if you have a couple of months where nothing happens or where you know. . . . I was so behind, I mean, years behind on my deadline.

But luckily my editor is so kind and understanding and was just like, "You know what, it will be ready when it's ready." And she was right.

[00:15:55] **Kendra** And I really appreciate you talking about depression so frankly and talking about your treatment. I was thinking, when I was listening to it, about Carrie Fisher's memoirs, particularly WISHFUL DRINKING. And then the second memoir, where she talks about having . . . is it . . . I think it's like electric shock therapy. Is that that right? And her just being very honest about like this is where she was at, and this is what she needed. Here are the common misconceptions about this. And she was just also very funny while talking about a very serious topic. And I think, like, I just imagine there's like a sweet spot that you're trying to hit with these things. And I thought it was very effective. I'd never heard of that kind of treatment for depression. I think it's just, you know, something maybe a lot of people don't think about. And right now, it's May. And it's mental health awareness. And so I think it's really, really fitting for that as well.

[00:16:48] **Jenny** Yes. Yes.

[00:16:50] **Kendra** Well, you mentioned how you also want to keep the books funny. And like, there's this Flannery quote or something about like, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." Well, to me, it's like, you know, "We tell ourselves jokes in order to live." I am one of those people who has a very dark sense of humor because of my disability and chronic illness. And it's like, you know, asking my spouse, you know, to go to the grocery store. And while he's there, "Can you pick up death for me? That would be great." And then he's like, "They're all out. What else do you want?" I'm like, "Well, I'm not in the mood for eternal torment. So what are my options like?" That's the kind thing that we have. So for you, can you describe the role of humor in your life and how you came to find that and how that's helped you with your writing and mental health and different things like that?

[00:17:43] **Jenny** You know, there's something about laughing at the things that are monsters that make them smaller and more manageable. And I think that's not just like. . . . It makes . . . it makes things easier for me if I can laugh at them when it comes to, you know, mental illness or dealing with arthritis or dealing with, you know, like all of these different things that are hard and difficult to deal with. Not only does it make it easier for me to laugh at them, but I think it also makes it more—I don't want to say relatable—but like it makes it where everybody can get a little bit on board. So if I write about, you know, some of the darker subjects, but I'm able to put humor into it, then a lot of people who wouldn't necessarily want to read a book . . . who are like, you know, I don't have depression. I don't have anxiety. I don't have any of these things that you're talking about. But if you make it funny enough or interesting enough, then suddenly they get into it. And they're like, well, okay, this actually . . . all right, this is worth it. This is what. . . . I actually really am enjoying this.

[00:18:56] **Jenny** And I think that's wonderful in a number of different reasons. But one of them is that I have had so many people who have come to me who have said, you know, I love your books. And I read them for years. And I didn't have any of the same issues that you had. But, you know, years later, I did have depression or had anxiety or I had . . . and I was able to recognize it for the first time because I was like, oh, wait, I read that before. Or, you know, they love somebody who has whatever those same struggles are. And so that it's just kind of an opening point where they can say, "Okay, wait. All right. So here's how she got through it. You know, maybe I can understand a little more." And I think when it comes right down to it, you know, I write about my personal struggles. But everybody has their own their own struggles that they go through. And so I think in being able to write

about it in a relatable, sort of funny way can open up, I think, compassion in other people. Because if I can make it funny enough, and people want to read it, then they may be like, "Oh, okay. Well, I didn't think this was real because I've never seen it in my life, but I guess it is real." And then once you do that, it becomes easier to understand everybody else's struggles because we're all—every single one of us—has a struggle that is, you know, may not be visible at all, but is absolutely real.

[00:20:34] **Kendra** I really appreciate your books because I have anxiety. And it's been—you know, with the pandemic—through the roof. And I, you know, have been semi-homebound since I was in my mid-twenties. So this was, you know, it was like everyone finally realized what I've been trying to explain to them, like what it's like. And I have the . . . when it gets really bad, it's like those spiraling thoughts. They start swirling in your mind, and it like flits from one thing to the other. And you've taken that language that your brain does and turned them into humor, which is something that I really appreciate. And you can hear this on the audiobook where you, like, just speed up and like just go through this whole spiel, this thing that might happen. And you're concerned. And wouldn't that be awkward? And how did that happen? And that's how I feel like a lot of us with an anxiety think. And you were able to harness that skill—I think it's a skill; we're going to say it's a skill—and turn it into writing, into prose. And I was just like, I never really noticed how this mirror, like how anxiety processes a lot of the time, which I thought was pretty cool. Maybe like, you'd rather not have had that skill, but now you're taking it and turning it into something new.

[00:21:54] **Jenny** Yeah. Anxiety is like your your brain is a run-on sentence.

[00:21:57] **Kendra** Yes.

[00:21:58] **Jenny** It's basically what it is. Yeah.

[00:22:00] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:22:01] **Jenny** You know, what I found is really nice though is that during the pandemic—which is like terrible, awful; I mean, my grandmother died of covid twice; like it's just ridiculous with the whole thing—but there have been so many great things that have come out of it. There's . . . I think there's so much more people understand now, you know, what it is like to be semi-homebound and what it is like to not to be afraid when you . . . somebody comes up next to you, and you're like, "Oh, that person is too close." Well, that's what anxiety is like all the time. And you know what I think is so . . . what's so great is that there are so many things that have been opened up now—you can hear my dog now barking—there are so many things that have been opened up because we have given ourselves more slack. And so now, all of a sudden, whereas before, you know, I had to do—when I did the book tour—it had to be a physical book tour. And you had to go to the stores and do all this stuff. And I love it. But it's terrible for my mental health. And I always, because of my autoimmune stuff, I'm always sick when I'm on the road because I'm meeting people. And it's just . . . it's really exhausting.

[00:23:27] **Jenny** And so with this, I was able to do a virtual book tour, which has never really been offered before. And not only was I able to do it, and it was wonderful for me, but there were so many people who . . . I mean, there were thousands of people who got tickets to the book tour who were like, "I have never gone to a book tour before because they were never offered virtual before." And so now all of a sudden, I'm like, okay, well, from now on, we have to do . . . Maybe I'll still travel one day again, but I want to keep the

virtual book tours. And I want to keep the virtual speaking. And I want. . . . There's so much that I'm like, this is so much easier for me. And the grocery store suddenly delivers, you know, whereas they didn't before. And I'm like, this is so. . . . I don't have to, like, walk on my arthritic feet. And there's just . . . there's some really great silver linings that have come from this.

[00:24:20] **Kendra** Yeah, definitely. I really appreciated that. It's like, for the first time, I'm able to talk to folks, and they're willing to work remotely. And so they're willing to work with me because I live around Hilton Head, South Carolina, nowhere near New York. And if you're in books, that is the place to be. And so I really appreciated being able to do that. And everything is delivered now, which is great. Granted, I feel like the boxes in my entryway kind of multiply on their own.

[00:24:49] **Jenny** Oh my gosh. Yes.

[00:24:52] **Kendra** Like, I had to, like, curb my anxiety purchases. And so then they just show up. And you're like, I don't remember ordering that, but I wanted it.

[00:25:03] **Jenny** Same. Did I do. . . . Did I order that at 3:00 a.m.? I think I must have ordered that at 3:00 a.m. I just get the weirdest stuff too. And I'm just like, okay, it's like a gift from 3:00 a.m. me, is what it is.

[00:25:17] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. I had to put this thing in place, like, you have to want this for more than a week. Like, you have to think about it. And so I had, you know, it's been a very tense spring with everything going on. And so I was like, I want a Tamagotchi. Do these still exist? So I started looking them up. And I fell down the rabbit hole of they have been reissued. There was an anniversary. They reissued a second one, which is called second generation Tamagotchi. And it's a whole rabbit hole. There's new ones now that are \$60.00, which is ridiculous. And so I just bought an old-school one. So now he's in the other room. And he just hangs out. And I've kept him alive for five days.

[00:26:03] **Jenny** That is impressive.

[00:26:05] **Kendra** It's great. Like, you know, that's the adventures that you go on when you're usually up at 3:00 a.m., scrolling through the internet. That and buying books.

[00:26:15] **Jenny** That is exactly right. I have a. . . . I'm starting to rediscover The Sims because I used to be like, really. . . . I loved The Sims. But they would always pee themselves. And then they would end up crying. And then they would die. And then I have to have a cemetery. And it was always so sad. And then I heard recently that, like, you don't have to take them to pee all the time. Like, it's changed a little. So I'm like, all right. Oh, all right. Maybe I'll come back.

[00:26:43] **Kendra** I love The Sims too. I am definitely a huge video game fan, and I've been counting down the days until Pokémon Snap released. It's very exciting. You just sit in a little automated car. Like you're on a safari, and you just take photos of Pokemon. That's like the whole game.

[00:27:01] **Jenny** Oh my god. Well, I am at level forty one Pokemon Go. So. Yeah. So it's a little bit embarrassing but yeah.

[00:27:12] **Kendra** You know I . . . My Animal Crossing Pocket Camp is . . . I'm over level 100. Like here we are, you know.

[00:27:21] **Jenny** So this is our new life. It's just like, so I have 4,000 dragons in Merge Dragons. How are you doing on Two Dots.

[00:27:27] **Kendra** So you know what we do in year two of the pandemic. I feel like it's less common, but the things that we are doing are more eccentric in year two.

[00:27:39] **Jenny** Yes. Yeah, I think that's. . . . We've doubled down on the weird. You know, my daughter has—she's sixteen—and she got into Dungeons and Dragons. And she just plays it virtually with these kids that she, you know, just knows online, really. And that's just kind of what saved her. And so, you know, three nights a week, she's like, "Oh, I got to go, you know, take care of the orcs. And I have to build world . . . do some world building. And I have to do. . . ." And it's a weird . . . it's a weird kind of world out there right now. But I'm okay with it.

[00:28:16] **Kendra** So speaking of your daughter, you have stories about your husband and all the eccentric things that happen, which I appreciate. Samuel and I have—my spouse and I—also have these eccentric conversations. You know, he's from suburban San Francisco. And I'm from, you know, rural Appalachia. It's a very unique combination. Like I had to explain to him, like, Okay, we're going to my grandmother's cabin. It was built by Amish people, but they didn't seal the outside. So I spent my childhood painting this log cabin. And, you know, that is the wood that my grandfather chopped for fun or when he was stressed. So we still have wood even though he passed away a few years ago. There're still more wood. You know, like you had to explain all of these different things. And so I remember in LET'S PRETEND THIS NEVER HAPPENED, there's a lot of that with you and Victor. So how do you decide what goes in the book and where your boundaries are? I'm sure stuff happens, and Victor's probably like, "If you write about this, it will be the end." Like you were not allowed. No. You know?

[00:29:22] **Jenny** Yes. So, I mean, you know, the books and the blogs are sort of the highlight reel of, you know, here's the funniest, you know, two minutes of the week. So I have, when it comes to boundaries, everybody that I write about, they get to see it first. And they have the right of first refusal, which just basically means at any point they can say, "I don't want you to say that." And no questions asked, I will get rid of it. The only time that anyone has ever said, yeah, please don't put that in there is my daughter. There have been a couple of things. When she was little, she didn't care at all. Then when she got into, like, the awkward early teen years, she was like, no, no, no, don't write that. And so I was like, yeah, that's fine. That's fine. She's older, so she's getting a little more relaxed with it. But typically, my real boundary is that I have to be the one that's being made fun of the most, that if there's . . . if there's a joke, I have to be the biggest punch line. So I think that's really helpful.

[00:30:25] **Jenny** What's wonderful is every time that I send something to, like, my parents or my sister or anybody who's in the book, and I'll be like, hey, read this chapter, see if you're okay with it. Not only are they the first people to say, like, "That's great; that's so funny." But they're also like, "Oh, you know what? I have pictures of that!" "Oh, yeah. I have pictures of your dad's championship armadillo racing ring." And the, you know, the raccoons that lived in our house that my mom would sew tiny jams for. She's like, "You know, I have pictures of that." Right. And I was like, "Yes! You have that!" Because nobody would believe me. People would just be like, there's absolutely no way that's true. First of

all, the stories that sound the most ridiculous are always the most true. But it's interesting how often something will happen, and I will be like, this is so funny and so great. And I cannot write about it because no one will believe that it really happens.

[00:31:23] **Kendra** I can believe that. As someone with a quirky family, sometimes when I read your anecdotes of what's going on, I'm like, I can definitely see this happening. And it makes me think about what weird stories are in my family, like the whole thing where like my grandparents had an outhouse. Great big Daddy Long Legs lived in there. And so you not only had to go in really quick, and it was always really dark. But you would also come out, and you'd have to brush yourself off to make sure any spiders that were like crawling around and. . . . You know, I married someone who is terrified of spiders. So I love to tell him this story when he least expects it. And every time, it gets the best reaction. And that's, I think, we all have weird stories at some point. And that's something that like you're willing to share your weird stories. And you are just like, you know, you share it in a very confident way in the book. And it's like you are just proud that this is just part of who you are. And I think that's very helpful for those of us who also have weird family because everyone does. Everyone—maybe unless you're the weird family member—everyone has weird stories.

[00:32:34] **Jenny** If you don't recognize it. . . . Yeah. It the, you know, a lot of my chapters are. . . . They're stories that are almost out. . . . I read. . . . So many of my friends are really great writers that tell these wonderful stories. So like, Samantha Irby or Ali Brosh or, you know. And I will all read their stuff because I'm friends with them. But I'm not. . . . I have such anxiety that I don't actually talk to them. And so I will write these response chapters. So I told Samantha, I was like, you know, you have no idea, but there are several chapters that are in my books that are just responses to, you know, I read a chapter of yours, and I'm like, oh my god, it's so funny. That reminds me of a story. And so basically, it's like, you know, my book is in conversation with all of these people who are like my semi-imaginary friends because I am too afraid to talk to them on the phone. Yeah, it's ridiculous, but it's wonderful.

[00:33:36] **Jenny** And I think what's so great is a lot of people I think really like my books because it reminds them of their own personal strange stories. And it reminds them about how wonderful those, you know, mortifying moments are and those bizarre moments and the weird stuff, the stuff that you wanted to pretend never happened. Those are the things that made you who you are. And so I think that's really lovely. And I have so many people who will write me letters and be like, this reminds me of a story. And so I have, like all of these. . . . I just have boxes of letters of people going, I need to tell you this family story because I think that you'd think that it was really funny. And it's great.

[00:34:21] **Kendra** I feel like your book calls for a very special set of really super important questions, of course, that I've been wanting to ask you. And so I thought we would jump into some fun questions. So first, we talked about weird purchases early in the morning. What is—that you're willing to share on the internet—what is the weirdest purchase that you have made during the pandemic so far?

[00:34:46] **Jenny** Oh, goodness. Let's see. So right behind me there is a baby alpaca taxidermy. It died of natural causes at a farm. And I dressed her up in all pink and called her Fleece Witherspoon. And Reese Witherspoon actually was like, this is fantastic. And I was like, all right, well, Reese Witherspoon likes it. And see, it was totally a good purchase. Yeah, it's weird. I have a lot. My dad's a taxidermist, and so I grew up with it. And now I just buy either really old and damaged—and then I dress them up in little people

clothes—or ethically sourced taxidermy. So like, you know, where nothing was killed for it. It died naturally or you know. So yeah, that would definitely be one. Fleece Witherspoon.

[00:35:44] **Kendra** So how many taxidermy. . . . My word, Kendra. So how many taxidermied animals do you think that you have?

[00:35:56] **Jenny** It's got to be more than fifty. But I will say a very large of a number of them are mice, dressed-up mice. So I actually have an entire mouse circus with everything from the tightrope walker and the dancing lady and the I mean, just, it's absolutely ridiculous. And then I also have some enormous ones. I have right next to me this bear that was. . . . It's got to be at least one hundred years old. And it's so falling apart, like it's missing an ear. And a bunch of its fur is gone. And it came from a bar. And we just found it, like, on Craigslist. And . . . but it's standing up and has its arms out like it just wants to attack you. And I dressed it up in like a judge's robe with like a lace collar and the black glasses. And it's Ruth Bader Ginsbear. And she stands right in front of the window. And I keep the window open. And that way when kids walk by, when they're on their walks, they can see Ruth Bader Ginsbear dissenting.

[00:37:14] **Kendra** Do you ever worry that there's like a night at the museum situation happening? And while you're sleeping, they all like have a party?

[00:37:21] **Jenny** No, I would want to. . . . I would want to be invited! I would think that would be fantastic. I love it.

[00:37:28] **Kendra** I wonder about that sometimes. I collect stuffed pandas. And I often wonder what they're doing while I am sleeping because there are some very interesting characters among them, including a four foot, giant, stuffed panda from Costco. Ajax is his name. We named him that and then realized later that that was the guy that fell on his sword. And, you know, that's the problem when you name things after mythology or Homer or whatever. You often forget—Oh, right, right.

[00:38:01] **Jenny** Right.

[00:38:03] **Kendra** Right. Athena kept turning people into spiders and stuff. Maybe I shouldn't have called my Kindle Athena. That might not have been the greatest. You know? My computer's name is Jeanette Winterson, and my iPad's name is Ali Smith because they are friends IRL. And I thought it might be nice for them to hang out together. So I'm more that person. But I love all your pun names. Do you make lists of names and then just pull from them as the need arises?

[00:38:35] **Jenny** I do have like a big default list of where I'm just like, we need to . . . we need to adopt another cat because I need . . . because I got all these great names! And my husband's like, "Yeah, we actually don't. Three is fine." And I'm like, "Ferris Mewler needs another sister!" And he's like, "For real, what's wrong with you? Please stop." Yeah. Yeah. So I do always have a running list of all the different animals.

[00:39:00] **Kendra** So you own a bookstore and obviously read a bit. The last question I have for you is what books would you like to recommend for our listeners.

[00:39:12] **Jenny** Oh my gosh. Let's see. So I have this book club called The Fantastic Strangelings Book Club. And we send out, once a month, we send out a book. And then we discuss it just online. So it's just like an open discussion so that people. . . . It's

basically like a book club for introverts. And all of my favorite books are the ones that I have chosen for. Let's see. I think we've been doing it for about fifteen months. So let's see. So some of my favorite books that we did were MEXICAN GOTHIC, WE RIDE UPON STICKS. DARK ARCHIVES was really good. I think a lot of people were afraid of it. DARK ARCHIVES is about. . . . It's written by a librarian who researched books that were bound in human skin. And it sounds like it would be really gross, but it's actually fascinating and really well done. And it's very much like Mary Roach. It's that kind of thing. We just sent out—this month's book is SORROWLAND, which is very good.

[00:40:22] **Kendra** I just bought that.

[00:40:23] **Jenny** Oh my gosh. They are just. . . . There have been so many. And what's, you know, what's really wonderful is because nobody was able to, like, leave their house, so many of the people that when I picked their books, they were able to, you know, either they'd do Zoom calls with us or they'd do, you know, like written Q and A's. And, you know, it was really helpful for them because last year was hard to sell books because you couldn't travel. And you couldn't do the tour. And nobody knew, like, should you print books? Should you not print books? And so we have like a couple of thousand people in our book club. And so it was always like a really nice thing to the author, who would be like, Oh, okay, a couple of thousand extra books like right off the top? That makes. . . . It makes a really big difference. We even had some that were. . . . They had printed so few because they were so afraid of what would happen that they were like, we're going to do a special printing just for you. So there's some of the books that even like open, and they say like, "This is printed especially for you, Fantastic Strangeling."

[00:41:25] **Kendra** That's really cute.

[00:41:26] **Jenny** So, yeah, they were really good. Oh, THE WITCH'S HEART, that was a really good one. And DEADLY EDUCATION. That was . . . I really liked that. And PROFESSIONAL TROUBLEMAKER. That was month before last. And oh my gosh, there's just . . . there's so many good books! And especially this year, I'm having such a hard time. June. I haven't picked June's book, and I have read probably eight in the last week, where I'm just like, oh, this one's good too. But this one's good. Oh my gosh. I don't know.

[00:42:04] **Kendra** What do you look for when you look for a book club book for them?

[00:42:09] **Jenny** I look for something that's not necessarily going to be a bestseller that will. . . . Somebody who. . . . An author that will appreciate, that will be like, oh, okay, this made a difference to me. I look for books that are strange and unique. I am a big fan of, like, own voices and diverse voices. And things that where you read them, and I instantly want to be like, Oh, I want everybody to read this so that we can talk about it. Then I know, like, okay, that's going to be a really good book. And it's interesting because, you know, when you have. . . . We have like 2,500 members right now. And when you have that many, of course, you know, there's always people who are like, oh, I don't really like sci-fi. And I'm like, well, the books sci-fi. Or, "I don't like horror," but so often. . . . Like every once in a while, people will be. . . . Especially with the DARK ARCHIVES book, there were, I think I had maybe one hundred people who were like, "Don't send me that book about human skin." I was like, "It's not actually bound in human skin. You're fine!" But most of the time, they're like, "Okay, I'm going to give it a chance." And then they're like, "I would never have picked this book out. And it was so good and so unexpected." And so, yeah, like MEXICAN GOTHIC was one of those where, you know, people were like, "No, that looks

too scary. I don't want to do it." And then they got into it. They were like, "No, this was so great. So, so, so good." Yeah. Yeah. But I would say dark. My tastes definitely run more dark. There's not a lot of romance or any of that. But there's a lot of magical realism. And then we do humor sometimes. We did Samantha Irby's *WOW, NO THANK YOU*.

[00:43:47] **Jenny** And we did optional books, which were we did a bunch of Grady Hendricks's books because he's so. . . . He's so, so good. And we did Christopher Moore's *SHAKESPEARE FOR SQUIRRELS*. Last month's optional book was *MADHOUSE AT THE END OF THE EARTH*. Have you read that?

[00:44:06] **Kendra** I haven't.

[00:44:07] **Jenny** Oh, it's so good. So good. It's all about this like doomed expedition to the South Pole or the North Pole. I can't remember. But it's like the true story of these people who basically had to become cannibals because they got stuck in the ice. And it's like, everybody hears about the Shackleton expedition. But this is like an expedition that nobody really talked about it. And oh, it was so good. And I just finished—I actually have it here next to me—Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *VELVET WAS THE NIGHT*, which is the the lady that wrote *MEXICAN GOTHIC*. This is her second book. And it comes . . . I think it comes out . . . when does it come out? In a couple of months. And if you like noir—which I don't super love—but if you like noir, it's fantastic. And if you don't super love noir, it's a good book because that's where I am. I'm like, I don't like noir, but this is really well written.

[00:44:59] **Kendra** Oh, that's interesting, I love how when you mention that, it's like I can now see like, oh, this is a Jenny Lawson book. Like I can see it in my mind. And I think you and Liberty Hardy would probably have the best time because you're both extreme introverts, but you love the weird and wonderful. Like, so I love seeing her tweet in your book. Like that just brought me so much joy because I was like these two were made for each other, you know.

[00:45:26] **Jenny** Yeah.

[00:45:27] **Kendra** But, well, thank you for coming on the show and chatting with me about books and weird happenings and all of the things. I greatly appreciate it. It's been really wonderful to chat with you.

[00:45:36] **Jenny** Of course. This was so much fun. Thank you for having me.

[00:45:39] **Kendra** And that's our show. Many thanks to Jenny Lawson for talking with me about her essay collection, *BROKEN (IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY)*, which is out now from Henry Holt. You can find her on her website, the bloggess.com and on social media (@thebloggess). 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. And you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks so much for listening.