

Interview with Kiley Reid.mp3

[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. And today I'm talking to Kiley Reid, the author of SUCH A FUN AGE, which is out now from Putnam. You can find the complete show notes as well as a full-length transcript of this episode linked in our show notes. Or you can check that out at readingwomenpodcast.com.

[00:00:35] **Kendra** I was so thrilled to be able to talk to Kiley Reid about her debut novel. She is a recent graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, where she was a recipient of the Truman Capote Fellowship. And she currently lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She was such a delight to talk to and just so charming. And I really loved hearing her talk about these characters, Emira and Alix, the protagonists of her novel, because I have not stopped thinking about these characters since I finished the book. And it was really great to hear from her perspective how she went about writing such an interesting story, the way that she wrote dialogue, the structure of the book. And I had so many questions, and she just was, again, delightful to talk to. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Kiley Reid.

[00:01:31] **Kendra** All right. Well, welcome to the podcast, Kiley. I'm so excited to talk to you today.

[00:01:36] **Kiley** Thank you for having me. I'm excited.

[00:01:38] **Kendra** Well, you've been having a whirlwind book tour for your debut, SUCH A FUN AGE. How has it been?

[00:01:45] **Kiley** It's been exhausting and really touching in ways that I was not expecting. I feel like it's just been this space where in, you know, so far sixteen different cities, I'm reminded of how much people are just addicted to storytelling. And I'm so glad that this story struck a chord. And it's been really fun to talk to readers so far.

[00:02:04] **Kendra** So what's it been like just to meet people who have read the book and enjoyed it on that kind of reader level?

[00:02:11] **Kiley** It's been such different reactions, which I really appreciate. I've had so many women say, "I've loved this book, but I had to put it down because I was so angry at certain moments." That's been interesting. I've had a lot of Black women reach out and say, "I haven't read a book where I could hear me and my friends speak. And this was one of them." And so that was really lovely to know that those moments came across really well. And maybe my favorite reaction so far. . . . I did have a friend text me that she was getting her nails done at a salon in Tribeca and a few women were talking about my book. And two of them gotten an argument over whether Alix Chamberlain when it was a good or bad person. They started screaming at each other, and they were asked to leave the salon. And on the way out, one of them shoved the other one! So. I do not want this book to cause violence, but that's a pretty great, strong reaction. Yeah, it's been very interesting.

[00:03:10] **Kendra** You're like, "I guess I did my job then."

[00:03:12] **Kiley** Yes, I did love knowing that. Exactly.

[00:03:14] **Kendra** Well, I agree. Those two protagonists are so fascinating. And I recently saw somewhere about the internet that the film rights have already been sold for this novel.

[00:03:26] **Kiley** They have, yeah. Which has been really exciting. I love film. I'm so inspired by so many different films, and I'm so excited to see what this can look like in a different medium.

[00:03:34] **Kendra** Is it right that Lena Waithe is involved?

[00:03:36] **Kiley** Yes, exactly. So her company, Hillman Grad, as well as Sight Unseen are joining forces. And it's great. It feels like this very nice collective workshop where we're all working on the same thing, which is great.

[00:03:49] **Kendra** Well, I mean, what better hands to have this kind of book?

[00:03:55] **Kiley** Yeah, I agree.

[00:03:55] **Kendra** So we mentioned Alix already. And Emira is the other woman whose book focuses on. Who are these two women?

[00:04:03] **Kiley** Yeah. Alix is an entrepreneur and mom of two. She's 33. She is from Allentown, Pennsylvania. But she has lived in New York City until the novel starts and she begrudgingly moves to Philadelphia for her husband's job. And she's a bit lonely. She doesn't have her network of friends and people that she had once before, and she finds herself a bit lost and lonely. And in a really vulnerable place. Emira Tucker is vulnerable for much different reasons. She is a graduate from Temple University. She majored in English. She's 25, but she has no guiding light of what she wants to do with her life. And she is coming to the end of her parents' health insurance. So she loves her girlfriends. She loves babysitting, but she feels like she's a bit of a late bloomer and should be somewhere different financially and as far as a career is concerned.

[00:04:55] **Kendra** I found both of these characters just so alive and so different. And when there are two women you're focusing on, you always want the difference in voice. And you could definitely tell. I mean, I listen to the audiobooks. I feel like that adds another layer of performance. But I thought they were really well done. And for example, the dialogue that you choose is amazing. You just have such an ear.

[00:05:17] **Kiley** That's my favorite thing is really hyper-realistic dialogue. And so I love writing things exactly how people say them. And I notice that one of the other reactions that I get on the road is how hearing really accurate dialogue is really cringy for a lot of people. Like Emira, when she's pushed, she can be a good communicator, but sometimes she struggles a little bit. And Emira has kind of this verbal tic when a moment gets awkward, which is kind of like a fifth-grade boy reaction where she kind of goes up, "Okay, well, that was really weird." And just tries to get out of the situation. But I think a lot of people have those. And so I wanted her to be as real as possible.

[00:06:01] **Kendra** I found that really fascinating. There's this moment where she's babysitting, and she's in this grocery store and something happens. Could you talk a little bit about that and her reaction?

[00:06:15] **Kiley** Absolutely. So Emira in the first chapter is hanging out with her friends. They're having a birthday night for one of their girlfriends until Alix calls and says, "We had a family emergency. Can you please take Briar out of the house? We just need her out of the house for an hour." So Emira takes three-year-old Briar to a high-end grocery store. And they're walking around—they're going to go look at the nuts; they're dancing to Whitney Houston—until a customer and a security guard, upon seeing a Black woman with a white child, accuse her of kidnaping the child. She's humiliated. Another customer pulls out their cell phone, and things aren't calmed down until she calls the child's father. And there's no shortage of plot in this novel. But it turns into a bit of a comedy of good intentions after that.

[00:07:02] **Kendra** That was the moment I was like, "Oh, this would make a great movie."

[00:07:05] **Kiley** Oh really? That's funny.

[00:07:06] **Kendra** Because you could see it, all the action happening. And there's this line. I think that Emira is thinking to herself, "This lady looks like someone who's danced in a grocery store with a toddler before." And I was like, I've had those thoughts.

[00:07:19] **Kiley** Yeah, I love just honest captures of human characters. And that scene was definitely a lot of, you know, choreographing this train wreck. And pacing was really important in that scene, especially in the moments right before the incident becomes serious. I think when something happens, it almost seems silly at first. And I wanted to really luxuriate in Emira kind of laughing it off before it becomes this dire situation.

[00:07:46] **Kendra** And you even see the stages of her panic as she's like, "Wait, what? Is this really happening right now?"

[00:07:53] **Kiley** Totally. "The stages of panic" is a good way to call it. Yes.

[00:07:57] **Kendra** And one of the things I loved about the book is . . . you know, I started listening to it one day, and I just couldn't stop. And I finished it the next day because it's such a plot-driven book, like you mentioned. And there's so many twists and turns. I literally gasped at this one point. There's a television interview somewhere in the book. And as soon as stuff started happening, I said out loud, "Oh, no." And my spouse was like, "What? What?"

[00:08:23] **Kiley** I love that so much. I love hearing the verbal reactions that people have. That's wonderful to me. I just love a really plot-driven story. And there's other things that I love from books, like when they comment on the world that we live in or when they make me see something differently. And so I definitely think that you can have a plot-driven story and also talk about, you know, class warfare and race as well.

[00:08:49] **Kendra** Yes, definitely. I was really impressed with not only is this a great story and it's well plotted and very page turner-y, but you deal with a lot of really deep topics, and you do them in a very intersectional way. Emira and Alix, like we've mentioned, are very different. So what made you want to compare and contrast these two women for the story of this book?

[00:09:12] **Kiley** I was mostly intrigued with having a three-dimensional relationship. I think that there's something really magical about the number three and storytelling for a number of reasons from so many fairy tales that have happened before. But also three makes for a

very interesting dynamic in that I think themes of ownership come around. From, you know, basic themes of, "Oh, this is my daughter. This is my babysitter" to "Okay, yeah, it's your daughter, but I spend more time with her" or "Okay, this is your boyfriend now, but I knew him back then." And I think all of those really tricky themes of ownership were really intriguing to me. And Alix and Emira came out of that. I also . . . I mean, I feel like every writer thinks that, you know, they're none of their characters, but they're also all of them a little bit. And so I am very different from Emira, but I definitely remember that financially precarious time in my 20s. But at the same time, I think that I have Alix's tendency to over analyze and obsess a little bit. But when it comes to the employee relationship, it gets her in a bit of trouble.

[00:10:20] **Kendra** I've seen a lot of women of all different kinds of backgrounds who have been a babysitter or a nanny really love this book because you captured that dynamic of, you know, being the one around the child the most and caring for them, almost raising them. But they're not actually technically part of the family in that way. And what, I guess, what inspired you to capture that dynamic? And especially the power dynamic that's playing in that relationship as well?

[00:10:49] **Kiley** Right. Right. I think I've always been really intrigued by complicated relationships, especially when they have to do with emotional labor. And I definitely remember that feeling of really loving a child that, you know, I can only see when it's for an exchange of \$16 an hour. And I think that when you place money on a relationship, it does something interesting to the relationship that I wanted to explore within my writing. Children . . . you know, especially when you're in your 20s as you're trying to navigate who you are through the world. . . . I was so interested with the sunk-cost fallacy of, you know, thinking, Okay, this job is no longer serving me, and I should move on, but I've put so much history into this one child, and we know each other so well now that I don't want to leave." And I think that the sunk-cost fallacy is double here because (1.) this job isn't serving Emira from a financial standpoint, but (2.) it's heartbreaking, but the child probably won't remember her after all of this work she's put into it. So it's a bit bleak and heartbreaking. But I think it's realistic, too, that childcare experience, and I was really excited to explore that.

[00:12:01] **Kendra** Yeah, definitely. I definitely felt for Emira. I've never been a caregiver or, you know, watching children in this kind of way. But the way that a lot of her attachment to the job is actually attachment to the child and wanting what's best for the child when she sees that Alix isn't being the best mom she might . . . could be.

[00:12:24] **Kiley** It's heartbreaking for Emira because Alix could be that mother. She's definitely capable of doing that. And I think that, in crafting Alix's relationship to her children, it was really important for me to show her as more of a symptom of a late capitalist society where she feels so attached to her value in terms of her work and what she's accomplishing. And some in some moments, she feels good about herself. And in some moments, her as a mom of two children isn't good enough. And I think a lot of people can relate to that.

[00:12:57] **Kendra** And we'll be back with more from my conversation with Kiley Reid after a word from our sponsor.

[00:14:40] **Kendra** You know, it's funny that you mentioned that people have very strong opinions about Alix and whether or not she's a good person, and I'm not really one to say

whether someone's good or bad because that's a bit more complex question. But Alix. Oh, my goodness. I'm just like, "Oh, honey."

[00:14:58] **Kiley** I think, "Oh, honey" is a great reaction. I love characters that you want to shake them, but you also want to hug them a little bit. And I think Alix is one of those people.

[00:15:08] **Kendra** It was really interesting because I am also white like Alix. But I come from a lower-income background like Emira. And so, like, I've been Emira, like trying to figure out health insurance, especially as someone with a disability. It's like . . . you have to have that health insurance. And she's so focused on the logistics of the health insurance. I was like, I feel you, I feel you, girl. Just hang in there.

[00:15:31] **Kiley** Oh yeah. It's this thing that controls every single one of your thoughts. And I definitely remember . . . I worked at a birthday party art studio, and I loved it. And I would do probably eight parties a week. And I would cut the birthday cakes really quickly for the children. And every time I thought, if you cut yourself, it's going to alter the course of your life, and you need to be really, really careful. And I think that that mentality just does something to you. Whether it's a tiny thing like birthday cake or if you have a chronic illness or disability—that's a completely different scale. And so Emira definitely experiences that every day, and I think it goes into who she is as a character.

[00:16:08] **Kiley** And I really appreciated how you compared her also . . . kind of more highlighted or compare/contrast with her friends. And so one of her friends gets a promotion. And it's like she's happy and sad at the same time because she was like, "I want that kind of job."

[00:16:26] **Kiley** Right. Right. And I think that she also sees that moment as, you know, it's her fault. She doesn't think about, "Okay, well, this girl, she's my friend, but she got this internship because her dad hooked her up." And Emira doesn't think about those things. She thinks, "What have I done to make this happen?" And she does the same thing with the racially charged instance in the beginning. She thinks, "Well, this wouldn't happen if you had a real job" and puts all of the emphasis on herself as an individual rather than a collective society.

[00:16:56] **Kendra** I feel like that's definitely a moment that a lot of millennials are having right now, especially with the job market the way it is.

[00:17:02] **Kiley** I think that's correct. You see people moving forward. And I think that in my 20s, I came to the understanding that the amount that I'm making right now is going to dictate how much I make for the rest of my life. And that's really terrifying when you're not set up for success.

[00:17:18] **Kendra** Definitely. I actually have never thought of that in those exact words before.

[00:17:24] **Kiley** In researching for this novel, I dove really deep into statistics of demographics of how much people make and how that, you know, shows how much that they make later and how much fighting for, you know, a promotion is not just fighting for a promotion for that year, but kind of fighting for it for the rest of your life as you leverage your history. And Emira is not in a place where she's set up to know these things, to understand what that means. And I hope I showed the truth of how she struggles with that.

[00:17:55] **Kendra** That just suddenly feels very daunting.

[00:18:02] **Kiley** It's a little bit daunting. I will say, though, that in Philadelphia, where I live, Philadelphia is kind of leading the way for domestic workers right now, which is really encouraging. And a bill of rights for domestic workers was passed in November so that people like Emira will be contracted whether they sign a contract or not. And they will be receiving things like the ability to give a two weeks notice and sick days and overtime and all of those things that can protect employees even when they're part of a family. So that part is really uplifting.

[00:18:33] **Kendra** Oh, yeah. I didn't realize that had happened.

[00:18:36] **Kiley** It just happened in November, which is wonderful. So I'm very excited to see how it's implemented soon.

[00:18:41] **Kendra** And I really loved how the book was set in Philadelphia. And I actually read your book and Liz Moore's book back-to-back.

[00:18:47] **Kiley** Oh, you're kidding. Liz Moore's a dear friend. That's amazing.

[00:18:50] **Kendra** So I was like, "Oh, wait, I'm in the same place. I wonder if they would meet each other on the street."

[00:18:55] **Kiley** Absolutely. It's funny because I will say that these books kind of brought us together. We originally had the same pub date. And I reached out to her and said, "Hey, do you want to trade books? They're both based in Philadelphia and coming out this winter." And she said, "Let's just get coffee." And so the rest is history. She's great.

[00:19:11] **Kendra** Oh, that's really cool. And you both have very like plotty, page turner-y type books, which is really cool.

[00:19:18] **Kiley** We do, yeah. Yeah.

[00:19:18] **Kendra** So you mentioned that you researched demographics for the book. Were there any other things that you looked into when you were writing it?

[00:19:27] **Kiley** Absolutely. I really dove in to the nature of money and class and how we talk about those things. And Rachel Sherman's book *UNEASY STREET: THE ANXIETIES OF AFFLUENCE* was a really big inspiration. Of course, I've talked a lot about how much I love dialogue and listening to her interview very wealthy New Yorkers about their wealth and about their view of themselves was a huge inspiration. But of course, there's also those little things that you end up researching for a novel that you will probably never use again. Like, in the beginning scene, there's a broken window because of eggs thrown at it. So I was researching what that means, if you should be calling the police, if eggs can break a window, what happens, how you get it repaired, all of those little things. I interviewed mothers again. I interviewed people from all of the jobs that I had the characters having, taking the train to Philadelphia to make sure I had that feel right. All of those little things. Yeah.

[00:20:25] **Kendra** I guess you wouldn't think of those, like you just read them in passing. But those are definitely the little details that make a book feel more . . . "authentic" isn't quite the right word, but maybe "realistic."

[00:20:37] **Kiley** I think maybe "realistic." I think that that might be right. It's so funny how, you know, it's fiction, so it's fake. But I think the more true things you add into it, the more real it seems often.

[00:20:47] **Kendra** Yeah, especially the tiny details of, you know, that make up the everyday life of a person.

[00:20:53] **Kiley** Oh, absolutely. Yeah. There's a lot of research into Allentown and to Fishtown. Sometimes I think just being in that area gives your words a bit more life and authenticity.

[00:21:05] **Kendra** Yeah, definitely. Did you research into like Alix's . . . I don't know what to call her job. What would you say?

[00:21:15] **Kiley** She's definitely a small business owner. And yes, there was a lot of time looking at other women who've made a business that isn't so clear cut and how they use social media and what that looks like for them and for their employees. Yeah, for sure, there was a lot of research there.

[00:21:32] **Kendra** She's a really interesting character in that I feel like in a lot of ways she embodies a lot of the conversation that society has been having about white feminism. I'm sure that's something that you thought about as you were writing her.

[00:21:45] **Kiley** I did. Yeah, Alix is a really interesting character in that way. And as I tour, I love seeing the strong reaction that people have. And it's been interesting because a lot of white women will say to me, "Oh, my goodness, this woman is such a monster." And a lot of Black women will say to me, "I know this woman. I work next to this woman. This woman is in my cubicle or my kid does a carpool with her." And so I think that that disturbing familiarity strikes a chord with people. Because Alix, she . . . on paper . . . she has Black friends that mean a lot to her. She reads Black literature, and she considers herself a progressive person. I would say that talking about race without talking about class in that way, especially with Alix, is really important because Alix on a surface level doesn't really have a problem talking to Black people, but she has a huge blind spot when it comes to talking to people who don't share class solidarity with her.

[00:22:45] **Kiley** And when it comes to Emira, she really struggles. She's had interns before. She's had white interns that she got along with wonderfully. But when she has this Black babysitter, I think that the fact that she may be exploiting this person, as many domestic workers are, comes to a head. And her response is to kind of superficially even the playing field by making sure Emira knows like, you know, "I go to Payless too, and I love Toni Morrison," all of these things. But unfortunately, that doesn't really do much for what Emira needs at the moment.

[00:23:18] **Kendra** I found the way that you combine those intersections of class and race so fascinating because it's like whenever Alix seemed to do the right thing, she would mess up in another area, and it's like she never could get her stuff together all at the same time.

[00:23:35] **Kiley** I feel like that's how I am in real life so often. Like, if I go into something a little bit nervous, I'll mess it up for sure because I'm thinking about it. But if I'm not thinking about it, that's what I'll do my best. So Alix is definitely a victim of that.

[00:23:52] **Kendra** Well, I'm sure I could talk to you about this book forever because it is absolutely fascinating.

[00:23:58] **Kiley** Thank you.

[00:23:59] **Kendra** But before I let you go, I always like to ask guests what women writers would you like to recommend? Maybe their books are similar or maybe that they're set in the same place as yours or really anything that you'd like to share?

[00:24:11] **Kiley** Absolutely. My other favorite book with a caregiver in it is Leila Slimani's *THE NANNY*. It's wonderful and also delves into those class things as well. And on the first page, you learn there's been a murder. So that was a very easy thing for me get into. That one was really wonderful. I recently really enjoyed Halle Butler's book, *JILLIAN*, about a young millennial who's struggling with a reception job. I'm very into books about jobs and the nature of work and all of that emotional labor. And my other favorite nanny in a novel is from Donna Tartt's book, *THE LITTLE FRIEND*, which I don't think it gets enough attention.

[00:24:51] **Kendra** It's true. It doesn't.

[00:24:52] **Kiley** It's so wonderful. And the nanny in her book, *Ida Rue*, is one of my favorite characters. It's wonderful.

[00:25:00] **Kendra** I really love that donna Tartt kind of embraced the South in that one.

[00:25:03] **Kiley** Oh, yeah. I loved it.

[00:25:07] **Kendra** Well, you are on book tour now. Do you have anything in particular you're looking forward to moving towards with your books or writing anything new?

[00:25:15] **Kiley** I'm excited to write again. I've loved being on tour. Definitely reminds me of why I'm writing. But I am definitely a creature of habit, and I love waking up at the same time, finding all of that pattern and kind of like hitting . . . writing . . . in a religious place. So I'm so looking forward to doing that with novel number two.

[00:25:35] **Kendra** I definitely agree with the routine. Routine is important.

[00:25:37] **Kiley** It is the best.

[00:25:37] **Kendra** It does help that I have a Corgi who's very much into routine and will remind me if I deviate from his preferred order of things.

[00:25:47] **Kiley** He's like a little alarm clock, I'm sure. That's great.

[00:25:49] **Kendra** He is. He is. And he will come and get you if you need to feed him, or he'll sit by the door. He's very polite. He's very so much a southern gentleman.

[00:25:56] **Kiley** I love that. Does he respond in an interesting way to daylight savings? I feel so bad for dogs. And they're like, "Wait, wait, it's time to eat." And you're like, "No, it's not."

[00:26:07] **Kendra** He struggles a bit. But I will say he likes to sleep in. So that has been really helpful.

[00:26:12] **Kiley** Good for him. I wish I could meet him. That sounds great.

[00:26:15] **Kendra** Well, thank you so much for chatting with me. It was a lot of fun. And thanks for sharing your book with the world.

[00:26:20] **Kiley** Thank you so much for having me.

[00:26:27] **Kendra** I'd like to thank, Kiley Reid, for talking with me about her novel *SUCH A FUN AGE*, which is out now from Putnam. You can find her on her website kileyreid.com. And on Twitter (@kileyreid). And of course, all of this information will be linked in our show notes. I'd like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. You can find Reading Woman at readingwomenpodcast.com and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). And thanks so much to all of you for listening.