

Interview with Lauren Groff

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, my name is Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking with Lauren Groff about her latest novel, *MATRIX*, which is out now from Riverhead Books. You can find a complete transcript of this episode on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:35] **Kendra** So I am delighted to be able to talk to Lauren Groff, one of my favorite contemporary writers. I fell in love with her work when I first read *FATES AND FURIES* when it came out several years ago. And she stopped by Greenville on her tour. And it was just this lovely memory I have from reading *FATES AND FURIES* and really loving what she did in the book. Of course, since then, she's had a short story collection come out called *FLORIDA*. And all three of her most recent books have been longlisted for the National Book Award. And so she's really done well for herself in that area. So I am not the only Lauren Groff fan out there, that is for sure.

[00:01:23] **Kendra** So I hope you all will enjoy our chat about her latest book, *MATRIX*, which is about a twelfth-century nun and basically her life living in this convent and basically just becoming this excellent businesswoman running this convent. There's lots of romantic liaisons and all sorts of things that happen in the book. And one of the things I think most people thought when they heard about this book was, "Lauren, why nuns?" But then you're like, "Wait, this is Lauren Groff. If she writes about rainbow raccoons taking over the universe, I am going to read about it." So I picked up this book and became engrossed by this woman's life, and I wanted to know more. She is able to tell so much detail about these women's lives in this convent that even though the book is under 300 pages, I felt it was much longer. And I really enjoyed the book. And so I hope that maybe our conversation, if you're hesitant about picking up a book about twelfth-century nuns, that this will convince you to go and get a copy for yourself.

[00:02:34] **Kendra** I really enjoyed talking to Lauren. And she was such a lovely person to chat with about all of the things. And I was particularly interested in her creative process and how she goes about choosing her next project. She says she has many going on at the same time. How does she decide what to focus on? What does she think about as she's writing? And how does that mental process work for her? Does she worry that people might not want to read her books as she's writing them? Like, there were just so many questions that I had that this particular book brought up for me. So I hope you enjoy learning about her process as much as I enjoyed chatting with her.

[00:03:17] **Kendra** So a little bit about Lauren Groff before we get started. Like I mentioned, she's the author of six books of fiction. Her most recent novel, *MATRIX*, has been longlisted for the National Book Award this year, which is fabulous. She received so many other awards and accolades, including being a finalist for the Kirkus Prize. And she was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Prize, the Southern Book Prize, the Los Angeles Times Prize. She also has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and was named one of *Granta's* best of young American novelists. Her work has been translated into over thirty languages. She now lives in Gainesville, Florida. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Lauren Groff.

[00:04:07] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the show, Lauren. I am very excited to chat with you about MATRIX.

[00:04:20] **Lauren** Thank you for having me on. I really appreciate it.

[00:04:23] **Kendra** Well, I remember reading FATES AND FURIES, so I remember reading that. And then I went and found your backlist. And all of your work is so incredibly different. And I imagine that having such different books into the world, it must be like a whole new experience, putting something else out there because, I mean, it's a new book and new topics and new things that you'll end up being discussing when you put it out there. So how are you doing, like, putting this new book out to the world after, you know, several years since your last novel?

[00:04:57] **Lauren** Yeah. Thank you for asking. That's very kind of you. Nobody's asked so far today. I'm fine, thank you. It's a weird world, right? I mean, having a book come out in the middle of a pandemic that we thought might be over-ish by now is tricky and is complicated. Bless my amazing publicist because they're doing absolutely the best that anyone could do. But it's . . . half of my events have been canceled, which is a little sad, but I believe in this book. And so I'm happy to go out there and talk about it, of course.

[00:05:33] **Kendra** And it's always delightful when you put a new book out because I'm like, all right, Lauren, you're going to take me on a journey. I'm ready. Like, I've no idea what's going to happen. Everything is new. And I feel like this one definitely was very similar with that. I feel like everyone I have talked to has been like, why nuns? So I wanted to ask you, when you move from such different topics or settings or characters, how do you decide what you're going to write about next? Is there like a process for you, like of elimination? Or is it just something that strikes you? Or how does that process work for you?

[00:06:13] **Lauren** Sure, I'm always working on multiple things at once—I guess this is part of the answer—because I'm really, you know, I'm constantly fascinated by the world and by human beings. And so half of the things that I work on actually don't end up working out. Eventually, maybe ten years down the line, they probably will. Who knows. But, um, the way that I know if something is worth spending years on—the years that it takes a novel to be written—is that if I feel like it's talking about—and I know this sounds very solipsistic—but if it's talking about something, some darkness inside that I can't even begin to see into, right? Because I know that if I begin to start going around that darkness, trying to peer into it, I'm going to be interested enough to bring myself through the whole difficult process of writing a novel that's so many drafts, so many doubts, so much frustration. And so you need to actually be fully invested in the book. I try very, very hard at the beginning to dislocate my sense of judgment. All I need to know about a book in the beginning is that I'm really excited by it, by the ideas or by the things that are, I think, that I can sort of see will be obsessing me. I think feeling that sort of all-body electricity, that's really, really important at the beginning of a book and knowing that, you know, I'm going to be able to spend the time that is necessary to make it, right? That's also a big thing. But to be honest, you know, there are things I've felt the electricity about that just have not yet worked out. And I've been working on them for twenty years, on and off. They come back. And I try, and then I'm like, well, I'm not ready for it yet. So I throw it back into the compost bin. It's all very complicated.

[00:08:25] **Kendra** Well, in writing school, I was the sprinter who wrote a ton of things and threw most of it out. Like. And my husband—who was also in the program; it's how we

met—is a plodder. He has to take forever to put every word on the page. And so I love listening to you talk about your writing process and how that's kind of how you work. You write a gazillion pages, and then you just pare it down, which is delightful to hear as someone who similarly does that. So I wanted to ask you—for Marie, how did you get to know her first? Because she's such a well-drawn character. And I imagine so much must have ended up on the cutting-room floor. So what was that process like getting to know her? Because I feel that intimacy when I read the book.

[00:09:20] **Lauren** Yeah, so. So because she was based on an actual person, right? Marie de France is a . . . the first published female poet in the French language that we know of. And because the details of her actual life are not well known or not known at all by historians, I had somewhat of an obligation to sort of frame things as believably as possible. And there are a bunch of theories about who she was, right? Some people say, you know, she's obvious . . . she was an abbess. Other people say she was obviously a noble. And people sort of pinpoint that she was, I think, the abbess of Barking Abbey in England. Other people, you know, say that she was Eleanor Beckington's daughter Marie. Who knows? Who knows? So I . . . what I could do—and I felt like this is almost a moral issue—was to try to know her from what we do know.

[00:10:25] **Lauren** And what we do know is the text that she has left behind, her book of *Lais*—which are these basically fantastical short stories in poem form, a poetry form—and her book of fables. And so what I did was I just sat down with those texts and slowly pulled out all of the images that I thought were really interesting and important, all the ideas that I thought were great and built. . . . And that was my substructure. That was the structure in which I built sort of a biography after I took this prose and sort of looked at it and tried to find the biographic. And all of this is, of course, imaginary. None of this is real except for it's what I had and what I knew.

[00:11:11] **Lauren** In order to get to know her. . . . So I do . . . I do a lot of fast drafts at first. So the first draft is—you know, after I do a great deal of research—I sit down, and then I give myself one month maybe to write a draft. And I write longhand. I write messily. Characters change names throughout. It's like . . . because I know I'm never going to go back and read it. It's just . . . it's basically a sketch trying to get what I, you know, on the page. And then I do more research. And then I write another one, maybe a little bit longer. Maybe it takes two months. Throw it out, start over again. This process eventually for me usually builds because there are, as you said, so many pages that get tossed and so much . . . so many ideas that don't end up making it into the final draft. I get a sense of maybe some of the stuff that's underneath the surface. You know, the whole iceberg theory of writing. Some of this stuff is just like literally stuff that's under the surface because I've written it. I know it. It's in my head, but it's just not on the page. And I think that's very important. I think for me, for building at least the major characters in any work is this understanding of who they are, what their motivations are beyond the life of the page.

[00:12:24] **Kendra** The book is really concise, and the way that you take these characters and you're able to tell these stories in a very short paragraph. . . . There's a moment where Marie has this horse. And we get the horse's backstory, and it's actually just a short amount of space. But we know almost everything we need to know about this horse. And I'm like, how did you do this, Lauren? So how do you take these, like, key moments for characters, even just like a horse and get them in that kind of space? Because I felt like I knew so many people so well by the end of the book.

[00:13:00] **Lauren** Thank you! That makes me happy. Yeah. So eventually, right before the final draft is usually the draft where I'm still working through deepening the implications of every given scene. But I know what the scenes are. I will go through, and I will just condense everything. I think that this, you know, the penultimate draft was probably 600 pages. I mean, it was really, really long. And then you just go through with a red pen and cut and cut and cut. And then with the next draft, which is always, you know, a rewriting. I'll take what I had finally and sort of translate it onto the page and try to sort of take the ideas and put it into the language that feels right for the text. And through that process is also another act of compression, an act of refinement. For me—and probably for you because you called yourself a sprinter—it's a . . . it's an experience of, like, over . . . like, just a huge expenditure of energy and then retracting that energy.

[00:14:09] **Kendra** And I love that. I'm obviously a little biased. And I imagine having, you know, imagine with the whole, like, research time period for this project and having so much information, I imagine it must be pretty challenging figuring out how to give enough information where we feel like we are in the time, even though no one has any idea. But we as readers, like, feel like we're in the time. And you set that atmosphere so well. Is there a particular time in your process where you were thinking about the reader and what they're going to be feeling like when they're reading this historical part of this novel?

[00:14:49] **Lauren** Yeah, I mean, I try not to think about the reader for the first few drafts, right? You know, I feel like my first impulse in the world is to be a control freak and to try to, you know, like, control everything. And so part of my writing process has been to try to break that aspect of my personality because it means that I can't do the writing that I need to do if I'm just obsessing over the same line at the beginning of the . . . of a draft. Getting back to the question that you asked, I mean, I think everything that I do is done in phases and bursts, right? The historical work, the research work—is I'm doing it constantly, but I'm also doing it in bursts. The writing, again, is constant, but also in bursts. And it's really just the moderation of the energy involved in putting the words on the page and trying to, like, understand the larger scale aspects of personality in order to find tricks that go around it that I think matter.

[00:16:00] **Kendra** And with this book, I imagine that part of the challenge was like, what is my readership, agent, friends going to say when I tell them that I'm writing a book about twelfth-century nuns? And for readers, you know, the thing I love hearing about this book is they're like, "I never thought I would care so much about twelfth-century nuns!" I hear it over and over and over, which made me excited for the book. But was that something that you were concerned for? Like, presenting into the world? And were you concerned that people might bring their misconceptions about what a convent might be like to the reading of this book?

[00:16:36] **Lauren** I, you know, I don't worry about that, at least at first. And then when I finally do, I guess so much work has gone into it that I can't worry about it. Like, I've already done all the work. Oh well! I guess, you know. You know, it's not that I don't think we shouldn't pay attention to our audiences. I think we should. But that part happens in the editing phase. I guess also in the . . . sort of like the deeply moral negotiation with why we're doing what we're doing, what characters we're using, why we're using them, things like that. I mean, everything . . . I think esthetics are moral, right? And the deepest esthetic problems are moral problems. And so it's all interconnected. But also at the same time, I think that we do need, as we're writing, to just keep the idea of readers really far away. If I had been thinking about readers, I never would have started MATRIX. Right? Like,

imagine coming to your agent and being like, guess what? I just wrote a book about twelfth-century nuns! Right? And like, the way that I can see my agent's face just, like, falling. Like, like him crying if I had actually done that. So you can't . . . you can't . . . you can't worry about it. You can only follow, like, the heat, the energy, the light.

[00:18:06] **Kendra** And I'm so glad that you work that way because you always surprise me when I read your books. There's always something. There's always something new, something different. It's like, I can tell that this is a Lauren Groff book. Like, I can feel your style. But it's way different when you're reading about a commune. . . . Well, I guess . . . it's sort of a . . . kind of sort of like a commune. I guess those are related. Sure.

[00:18:31] **Lauren** Yeah! They're utopian! They're utopian experiments. Absolutely. Yeah.

[00:18:35] **Kendra** And one of the things I was surprised about as someone, I guess, who lives now is the freedom that a lot of the nuns had to practice their craft. And that's like a recurring theme is like how much that Marie wants the convent to be on its own and like this isolated, perfect place versus the reality of living in this world. I . . . how did that process work for you of getting to understand what a convent is like? Because I'm going to be honest, I have no idea how a convent would be like now, let alone in the past. And it's a very feminist. . . . You know, there are a lot of feminist themes throughout their life at the convent as well.

[00:19:11] **Lauren** Yeah! I did. . . . You can do a great deal of research in what the day-to-day life of a medieval nun was like. You know, this is . . . this is something that there are a lot of great historians have spent their entire lives researching and putting into the world. And so that is amazing that we get to have this idea. You know, obviously, it's not that I wrote a book that's a fable persay, but there are fabulous elements in this book too. And one of the reasons why I chose to write this book is because I'm just imagining writing about the contemporary world and all of the . . . the, like, successive constant waves of disaster that were coming at us and continue to come at us without cease, almost not allowing us the time and space to breathe. It just seemed like so much. . . . I was unable to engage as deeply as I felt was morally necessary in order to do . . . to write a book set in the contemporary world. At the time, I was not able to do it. And I . . . part of it is my own vulnerability and my own lack of ability to do it at the time. Part of it is just the overwhelming nature of the world right now. And so when it came to my attention that I had to write this book, this historical fiction, I really thought very, very hard about what it means to write historical fiction. Does it mean that it is an escapist work? And I would never want to write an escapist work. And I have nothing against people who do. Right? I think that that is a choice that people can make, and that's great. But it's not what . . . the choice that I wanted to make.

[00:21:00] **Lauren** I wanted to write a book that had modern resonance and historical resonance. And those two forks, like two tines of a tuning fork, sang back and forth—the past and the present. And so I was able to write about the contemporary day, but slant. Right? I was able to actually look back in time and see maybe the roots of where we got to now, look back in time and see sort of the burgeoning, the new growth that became the old-growth forests of where we are now, sort of at the brink of climate collapse and democracy, everything. So it was . . . it was a moral choice for me to engage with the present day and not be escapist in this particular work.

[00:21:50] **Kendra** And I love the fabulous elements that you mentioned. There's a lot about faith in this book. And there's a lot of. . . . You know, I'm not Catholic, but I've read

enough books, I guess, to know different saints and their stories. You have all these, like, little nuggets about that as well, which are delightful. But I wanted to ask you, there are so many different ways that the theme of faith plays a role in this book, whether that be people learning about the environment or animal husbandry and understanding the nature and how that works. And there's craft . . . all sorts of things in this book. For you, how did . . . how did that theme work out? Was there any particular approach that you went into it wanting to discuss faith in different ways? Or is that just something that came about naturally as you were writing the book?

[00:22:37] **Lauren** Well, I mean, I think that it would be really hard to write a book about an abbey where faith wasn't at least one of the themes. Right? Like, I think that that is a very central theme around which the nuns' lives were built. And therefore, even if . . . even if, as at the time, there were people who probably didn't believe in the dogma of the church as deeply as one assumes they did, that's sort of the inherent doubt would be part of the story. Right? Or alternatively, if every single person at a nunnery had a true, deep, from birth vocation, that that too would be part of the story too. So the faith or the negative image of the faith would all sort of reflect back into the book in any given way. When editing happens, for me in particular, I will go through many, many times with different color ink. And each color ink has its own thing. Right? Because I get deeply overwhelmed if I don't do this. So I'll take like a red pen. And the red pen will just be dialogue, for instance. Or I'll take like a green pen. And the green pen will just be descriptions. Or, you know, I like a thematic idea, and I'll go there and only pay attention to that thing. And the beautiful thing about that is that it's like shifting tiny threads in order to make the rug tighter. And as you shift some things, other things get tighter just naturally. And so when I was going through the editing process of this book, I shifted, shifted, shifted. And then faith became its own thing that I did sort of a draft for. And it became something that I would just, like, tweak little things in order to make more apparent in the book.

[00:24:28] **Kendra** This is the editing nerd in me, but I love that idea of going through and marking all of these different things because they're so intricately linked. Usually when I reread a favorite, for example, I try to pay attention to one thing that's new to me, right? And so . . . And I love annotating my books, which usually ends up meeting. I have like a gazillion editions of, like, MRS. DALLOWAY, for example, because I ran out of room in the margins. So it's like, "Okay, well, here we are again, bookstore. How's it going?" When you were writing about faith, I feel like maybe it's because early on there were so many books about faith and I feel like there aren't as many now in contemporary literature that's being written as much, or maybe there's just so much being written that it's a smaller percentage. Was there anything that you wanted to be aware of going into this book? That this might be in dialogue with other books that are currently being written? Or did you kind of stick with that "I'm an island unto myself; I'm just going to write what I want to write" kind of perspective that you've taken on a few different other parts of your craft.

[00:25:40] **Lauren** Well, I don't believe that anything is an amination of a single source. Especially not art. Art is a much broader, larger, beautiful conversation that happens over millennia. And it's everyone's voice is allowed to take part in it. And everyone's allowed to listen and write. So it's . . . it's this broad river. You can dunk your feet. You can swim across. Whatever you want to do. But you're there with the voices of the past and the voices of the present and the future. So in terms of faith, some of the books that I was thinking about as I was writing were, for instance, MARIETTE IN ECSTASY, which is this extraordinary book by Ron Hansen about a nun in the twentieth century. I was . . . I kept going back. And it's not really about faith, but her style and her . . . the way that she's so light in history and the way that love appears weirdly . . . is Penelope Fitzgerald's THE

BLUE FLOWER, which is another book that became a prototype that I was sort of speaking in conversation with too. There are so many books that go into every single book that I write that we could spend the next like forty-five minutes talking about this in particular. But those are the ones that come up now. And I'm sure, like, I'm going to wake up in the middle of the night, and I'll be like, "Oh! I forgot to say ____! I'm so sorry."

[00:27:21] **Kendra** Well, I feel like when . . . you also absorb things that you're reading, you don't even realize. And then when you read, whether it's classics or what's, you know, what's happened the past or what's being written in the present, you kind of absorb that. And then maybe you go to write, and there might be something like, oh, okay, I see where I got that. And then you kind of edit, and you decide, like, what do you want to keep? And does it actually work? Or do I just really love this book and, like, wanted to put this in there? So I love hearing about influences on writers. So you've already answered another question I had. I'm assuming you read a lot while you're writing as well?

[00:28:01] **Lauren** I read a ton. Yes, no, all I want is the voices of geniuses of the past, sort of in my head reverberating there. I mean, I, you know, I can. . . . Everyone has a different process. I get it. But at the same time, I don't understand why people say that they don't read while they're writing. Why don't you want George Eliot's voice in your head? Like, come on. Like, why don't you want Emily Dickinson there with you, making you less lonely in your work? Of course you do.

[00:28:30] **Kendra** Yeah. There's so many books in the world also. Like if you . . . if your life is being an author, when would you read then if you can't read while you're working on something? I've always wanted to ask someone that question who had that way of working? So maybe one day. But you've mentioned George Eliot and Emily Dickinson. Are there any novels maybe that you have read recently that you have really enjoyed that . . . I don't . . . I guess that's really it—that you've really enjoyed, have been like a solace for you during this very anxious and tumultuous time that we are living through?

[00:29:06] **Lauren** Yes! Many! Very recently. Okay, so I just yesterday read HARROW by Joy Williams, which I think there's no one who writes a line better than her living at all, period. Like she is the greatest writer of lines, period. This is a very weird book in a great way. It's very mysterious. It's about climate change, apocalypse. It's very funny. But also you end up in a place where you're like, I don't know what to think about this book. So it's definitely fodder for thought. I just read another nun book. It's AGATHA OF LITTLE NEON. I really liked it a lot. I think it's a first book, maybe. It's so funny. It's lovely. Let me see. I've got a great deal of solace from the work of Roberto Bolano, especially 2666, which makes the reader complicit in the evil of . . . that he was talking about in a way that I've never seen before and sort of blew my mind. I've already read. . . . I read the book when it first came out and then reread it. And I didn't remember much of it. And now it's basically I fall asleep thinking about it. I wake up thinking about it. It's one of those books. Like, it's possessed me. I loved also his other, like, slim novella masterpieces BY NIGHT IN CHILE and ANTHEM—I believe it's called ANTHEM . . . AMULET . . . ANTHEM. . . . They're both amazing. They're amazing. And they all exist in the same sort of fictional world in a way that I think very few people do successfully. So those are the ones that have come to mind most recently.

[00:30:52] **Kendra** And it's always hard to choose, I imagine, when you get asked that question. How do I choose? What did I say last time? What am I going to say this time?

[00:31:02] **Lauren** Yes. And everything falls out of my head, too, because I. . . . In the panic of choosing, I'm like, oh my god, what have I read? I know that I read 300 books a year, but like, I can't remember a single one. You know?

[00:31:12] **Kendra** I have to go to my Goodreads when people ask me. I'm like, what did I just read? And it's not like I didn't like it. It's like my brain just emptied itself just at that moment.

[00:31:20] **Lauren** Yes. It just pours out. I'm with you. It's libations. Yeah.

[00:31:26] **Kendra** So the last question I have for you is you say you work on multiple projects at the same time. Is there anything you can say about your future projects? And if you were to say, I'm going to be writing a book about rainbow raccoons trying to take over space during an ice age, I would believe you. So feel free to say whatever.

[00:31:44] **Lauren** I would love to write that book. So I do believe that my next book will be the one that I put aside to write MATRIX. And it's basically a female Robinson Crusoe set in 1609. So knock on wood it comes out.

[00:32:00] **Kendra** I love an adventure story. And I love that you are just up for writing whatever comes for you because. . . .

[00:32:08] **Lauren** Whatever.

[00:32:09] **Kendra** You just like, "I'm going to do it." And I love that because, again, I love how different all of your books are. And I went—and I collect hardback first editions—and I found one of THE MONSTERS OF TEMPLETON. I'm like, I'm just going to keep this in my life forever. I'll put it in plastic.

[00:32:26] **Lauren** Oh, thank you!

[00:32:27] **Kendra** So very excited for that. But congrats on MATRIX. I hope it does really well across all of the things and that you have a lot of new fans. So, yeah, congrats.

[00:32:39] **Lauren** Thank you so much. This has been so fun. I really appreciate it.

[00:32:43] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Lauren Groff for talking with me about her novel MATRIX, which is out now from Riverhead Books. You can find her on her website, laurengroff.com, and on Twitter (@legroff). 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). And thank you so much for listening.