

## Interview with Leah Hampton

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. Today, I'm talking to Leah Hampton, who is the author of F\*CKFACE: AND OTHER STORIES, which is out now from Henry Holt. For a full transcript of this episode, you can check out the show notes or head over to [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com). And make sure you're subscribed, so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:37] **Kendra** So as you may have gathered, the name of this short story collection is not F-FACE. But we have a public radio rating here on Reading Women. So we're just going to go with F\*CKFACE for now. But I was so excited to talk to Leah about this short story collection because late last year and early this year, whenever I would talk to Appalachian writers, this collection was always mentioned. It was always at the top of people's lists. And being from Appalachia and loving the region so much, I'm always hesitant to pick up books. And I always kind of hold my breath to see what happens when I read about my home region. But I absolutely loved this collection and the way that Leah gets into the everyday lives of Appalachian people from a wide range of locations in Appalachia and looks at these small moments in their lives and how those small moments have huge ramifications on the choices and the direction that that character's life is going to go. It's just incredible. And each story is so tight and concise, and every word is there for a reason. And I was just so impressed by this collection. And it's definitely one that I will be rereading and returning to to try to figure out how on earth did she write such excellent stories.

[00:01:55] **Kendra** So I was delighted to be able to talk to her. And it was a bit of an adventure, very on brand. When two Appalachian people get together, something is always going to happen. And there was actually a hailstorm that came in while we were recording. So the internet went in and out. And so we had a few different segments of this interview that I put together in the end. So you might notice a few audio differences here and there. But in the end, we were able to have a great discussion about a lot of different topics around Appalachia. And so I hope you enjoy listening to it as much as I enjoyed talking to her.

[00:02:30] **Kendra** So a little bit about Leah before we get started. So Leah Hampton writes about Appalachia, corpses, eco-anxiety, and smart women. Her debut collection F\*CKFACE: AND OTHER STORIES, what we're talking about today, just came out in July. She is a graduate of the Michener Center for Writers. She has been awarded the UT-Austin's Keene Prize for Literature, the James Hurst Prize for Fiction, and the Doris Betts Prize. And so she has been awarded so many prizes and fellowships and has really made a name for herself as an Appalachian writer. She currently lives in North Carolina, where she was when we recorded this episode. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Leah Hampton.

[00:03:18] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the podcast, Leah. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:03:22] **Leah** Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be here.

[00:03:25] **Kendra** I am so thrilled for your book. I read a lot of Appalachia literature. And when I would ask around, like, you know, "What books are coming up?" Your book was always at the top of the list. And so I was like, of course, I have to read this. And I'm so glad I did because these stories are just. . . . They're just fantastic.

[00:03:44] **Leah** Thank you so much. That's nice to know. I've had a lot of people from the region been really supportive of it. And I think that's been the best part of this is feeling like people who know get it and get the book. So that's pretty great.

[00:04:00] **Kendra** Yeah, we're in. . . . I live in Greenville, South Carolina now. But I grew up in the Tri-State region of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. And there's a story in your book where one of the characters travels from Charleston to Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky, where my parents live. And I was like, I know that road. I know that highway. Like, I know this. Like the places they stop, I could see it in my mind. And that's so rare when you come from Appalachia because it's like you rarely see your region represented that way. So it was just delightful, a delightful book to read.

[00:04:36] **Leah** Yeah, I did a lot of research on different places in the region, and I know that there are points in the book—I just want to preface everything by saying—I know there are places in the book where I do get locations wrong. But I had to do it for certain stories because I needed a place to be. Like I needed the hospital to be across the street from somebody's house, even though there's no houses there, you know. So, uh. So, yeah, don't @ me if there isn't something there that I say is there in the book. But yeah. That's a nice. . . . Yeah. That's an interesting drive too.

[00:05:11] **Kendra** It is definitely. So your book came out during this very tumultuous time, during the pandemic. What has that been like releasing your first fiction book during just this unprecedented time, I guess, in history?

[00:05:28] **Leah** You know, I'm not even sure. I've talked to a couple of other writers who are going through the same thing. And we just can't even really articulate what it feels like because on the one hand, you're so selfishly infuriated, especially because of the political landscape. And, you know, you're just like, why is this happening right now? I worked so hard, and my book is coming out. And no one's going to know. But the other side of that is that, you know, at least for me and the people that I've talked to, we're all writing about people that need their stories told, or that we feel like we're trying to amplify things with our books that we want people to share and people to appreciate. So it's like this challenge to feel in touch with people's pain and to be aware that there's something so much bigger than you that I want to join, and I want to be part of. And so there's. . . . The balance that I've tried to have is just to be present with current events and with the news and to not forget how huge and sweeping this is. And to try to be, you know, compassionate about our collective experience right now and then for myself just to try to be at peace with the fact that I'm just this tiny, tiny thing in this ocean. But that story is really important. And not to forget that, especially in times of crisis, just as a species, we need story. And story is how we process the things that happen to us. And, you know, that's where I think poetry comes from and all that stuff. So I guess my feeling is that I feel really, really small, but good. Does that make sense?

[00:07:17] **Kendra** Yeah, no, it definitely does. Especially having—I just finished the last story in your collection yesterday—and I definitely feel that reading your stories. What has it been like to have that book go out? And what has the reception been like, both in the region and outside of it?

[00:07:34] **Leah** I've had really wonderful reception. And I'm so grateful to people who are tweeting pictures because I think people like the cover and because the title is somewhat controversial. So they're tweeting pictures of it. You know. There was a tweet this morning

from Chris Offut, who's a wonderful writer that I love. And he put it in a . . . um . . . he went gardening and picked a bunch of stuff from his garden. And so there's like organic okra and carrots and like radishes and F\*CKFACE like sitting in middle. So. So that was pretty cool.

[00:08:06] **Leah** But the reception has been a bit of a challenge, too, because it is the middle of a pandemic. And there was Mary Trump's big fat book about her uncle, the president, came out on the same day. And also because of the title, it's difficult for . . . there are some bigger media outlets and radio outlets that can't cover the book because of the title, even though the book itself is not, you know, it's not dirty in any way. And even though the title is censored with an asterisk, I've had like big papers pass on reviewing it because they can't and things like that. So it's been very, very positive reception, and all the reviews have been very good. And that's very heartening. But I do kind of feel like this scrappy mountain girl who's, you know, like standing on the side of the road while everybody is going to the fancy restaurant. And I'm like, I got barbecue! Do y'all want some barbecue? Come on, y'all. You know, you kind of feel like a little rebel in the book world right now. And I mean, that's fine. And it is. I mean, it's not like I haven't had, you know, press for the book. I'm not. . . . I'm very appreciative of the reviews I've had. But because of the times and because of the title, it's been like, Okay, I'll just stand over here while y'all have your party. You know.

[00:09:22] **Kendra** Well, it's an excellent collection. And I went online and looked at several different reviews. And I noticed that they like to use the word "compassion" a lot and rendering Appalachians as fully human and kind of ideas in their reviews.

[00:09:41] **Leah** Yeah. Yeah. And they're very positive, and they're very nice reviews. And I don't fault people for trying to say that, you know, I'm. . . . I think it's just a roundabout way of saying they like the characters, which is great. But yeah, there is this thing of . . . yeah . . . that sense of "Oh! Oh, they're three dimensional?" These people are not cardboard cut-outs with, you know, Confederate flags? And I think people just don't. . . . If you're not from a region like this, you only know the stereotype. And that's been reinforced so heavily for so long. And that's part of the. . . . And I want people to know that they shouldn't feel necessarily bad about that because that's a very intentional process from the media and from very large corporations, particularly energy corporations that have been in the region and from both sides of the political spectrum.

[00:10:39] **Leah** They have used Appalachia. Appalachia is a meme. And it's how we talk about poverty in this country. It's how we talk about the environment in this country. It's how we make ourselves feel better about the bad things we do in this country. Is by saying. . . . You know, I think the way that energy companies and political movements or, you know, J.D. Freakin' Vance or people we don't want to talk about. . . . Like, how those people have made their money and how they have made this country and the world feel okay about the shady ways that they've made their money or made their political careers is by saying, "This place isn't quite as good as everywhere else. And these people are simpler." And therefore, it's okay for me to come and take all this timber. It's okay for me to lie and say that I spent summers here with my grandmother and sell five hundred million copies in my memoir or whatever. You know, push it down just a little bit and then nobody will notice that you've polluted the most beautiful and most diverse ecosystem on the continent. Right? It's just a system of thinking. And that's. . . . And people are not to feel bad about it. They're just to buy the book and buy books from people who—and look at art—from people from the region who are really trying to show that it is three dimensional, four dimensional. This is a complicated place.

[00:12:10] **Kendra** Yeah, definitely. It's very . . . it's very diverse in the way that Appalachian culture is. So, for example, I'm from the Ohio River Valley. But my friend who co-founded this podcast with me, she's from Knoxville. And I would tease her that she was a city girl, and she hated it. But she was because Knoxville is a huge city in Appalachia.

[00:12:34] **Leah** When you're from Asheville—because I live really close to Asheville; I lived in Asheville for many years—you know, people will tease me and say, "Oh, you're just highbrow. We can't trust you."

[00:12:42] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah. The Appalachia hipsters are in Asheville.

[00:12:48] So there's so much diversity in just this region. I mean, it's a huge region. I think a lot of people don't really understand that. But I really appreciate that in your collection, you have such a wide range of different locations in Appalachia and different kinds of people represented. And so you got like a full, like, little tour of the different types of people that may live in the region, which I thought was great. You mentioned that you live in Asheville. Is your family originally from Asheville? Or did you move there?

[00:13:21] **Leah** No, I moved here. I'm kind of different because my father and his family. . . My father was born in SOMECOUNTY Kentucky. And my family goes back in those mountains for ever, generations and generations. But my mother is British. And so we kind of moved between the rural south when I was a kid, and I lived overseas. And as an adult, I've lived overseas. But my family came to Asheville when I was a teenager. So I'm not native to the region. But I say that I'm from here because, you know, I have two passports. And I don't know where I'm from. So I'm from Asheville.

[00:14:07] **Kendra** Yeah, there's definitely a weird feeling. You know, I moved away from southern Ohio to South Carolina for college. And people still walk up to me and grab my elbow and say, "Oh, honey, you're not from here, are you?" I'm like, I've been here twelve years!

[00:14:23] **Kendra** And so you have, is it, twelve stories in the collection. And they all have this beautiful sense of place to them. And they're all very different. So when you start writing a story, what comes to you first? Does the place come? Or the characters? Or the situation? How does that process work for you?

[00:14:53] **Leah** So normally for me, things come to me either as a line of dialogue or as some kind of image. Sometimes it's a person. Sometimes . . . in one case, it was the title of a story. The story "Frogs," I just decided I really wanted to start writing about frogs. But usually it's a line of dialogue. So I'll just kind of use that as an example. Anyway, I'll think of a line of dialogue, or I'll hear something out organically in the world. And then I just start asking myself questions. I try to. . . I try really hard not to push a story or not to, like, make it. What I try to do is follow. And so, like, I'll type up that line of dialogue. And then I just start asking questions. Like, who would say that? And then who would they be saying that to? And what would their response be? And then it just kind of unravels really slowly from there. And I always feel like I'm following it rather than—if I'm doing it right—I feel like I'm following rather than leading the story. It just unravels kind of in front of me. I try to describe it as listening. Like I'm . . . on the first draft, I'm just listening.

[00:16:07] **Kendra** You have a wide range of perspectives in your stories. And you have first person, third person. You even have a second-person story. How do you decide what person you're going to use and what character you're going to focus on for the story?

[00:16:22] **Leah** I think it depends on how strong a character is, whether I can write in first person because I tend towards close third. And I really like close third because you can get really, really close to somebody without actually having to be them. And it's only when I really kind of get who somebody is that I feel comfortable inhabiting their voice, you know. Otherwise I like to just sit on their shoulder. I think I was trying, in this book, to kind of change it up a little bit. So there were a couple of stories where I consciously had to make the decision to write in first person or not to in some cases. But for the most part, it's natural for me to go to that close third. And I think that's the majority of stories in the book.

[00:17:03] **Kendra** When you mentioned close third, that . . . I mean, it's really hard to differentiate between those in my mind, between those and the first-person stories because you're just so much in the mind of the characters. These stories are really tight, and they have. . . . Every word is there for a reason. And I think oftentimes, short fiction is much harder than longer fiction. How long do you typically work on your stories?

[00:17:30] **Leah** Oh, gosh, forever. I mean, I. . . . My friend David Joy, who's a writer, we have this, like, understanding. We talk about it all the time that novels and short stories and poems, they all have to do the same amount of work. It's just that you have to do it in less or more space. You know, like, I think a novel. . . . A poem has to do as much work as a short story. A short story has to do as much work as a novel and vice versa. And there are challenges, obviously, with any of those forms because with a novel, you have so much space, and you need to maintain that momentum. But with short stories, it's about deciding what not to include. What can the reader assume for themselves? And how can it still feel intimate without giving them every detail? So, yeah, it takes me a really long time. There are stories in this book that took me five years to write. And then there are stories that took me three weeks. It just kind of . . . I think it depends on what my emotional state was at the time a lot of the time . . . or how strong the, you know, kind of inciting or inspirational image or character was. But I tend to, generally speaking, I write a story. And then I put it away for a month and just let it sit because you get that writer's high, where right after you've written something, you think, "This is the greatest thing I've ever made."

[00:18:40] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:18:41] **Leah** And it's not. And that's a great feeling. And you want to keep that feeling. And you want to buy yourself a beer on that feeling. But you do not send that. You do not submit that story. You put it away. So that's what I do. And some of them had to sit for a really long time before I could figure out how they were supposed to end or what they were supposed to be.

[00:19:02] **Kendra** So several of these were published other places. So when you came to put them together in this collection, how did you decide what stories to include? Because I imagine you've written many more that weren't in this collection.

[00:19:15] **Leah** Not too many, but a few. Yeah.

[00:19:17] **Kendra** How did you decide also what order the stories appear in the collection as well?

[00:19:22] **Leah** Yeah, that's an interesting question. I started off thinking that this was going to be a book that went by season, you know, where I had a group of spring stories and a group of autumn stories or whatever. And then that kind of fell away because, I think, this is not a linked collection. Not technically. And I think that sometimes those architectures in short story collections can feel forced. And because there's so much commonality in the environmental impact that people are experiencing and, I think, also in the loneliness that these characters are all feeling even though they're in different places, I just decided to go with like this emotional roller coaster for the order of stories rather than have any kind of synthetic structure for the book. So it's like an emotional organization. I played around with it and wound up just going with how the reader would feel and get to the end of one story and be kind of sad and then be like, "Okay, let's talk about butt-sex," you know, and move into the next thing.

[00:20:28] **Kendra** That was a great first line, first paragraph really, of that story. And you know, what's interesting about that one is that with Appalachia, there's a lot of different topics that are very much the discussions of the moment. And one of them is leaving and returning home. And in that particular story, the character has been working in Knoxville, goes home, and meets people that she grew up with. And there's stuff with her sister and all this sort of thing. Did these topics that are going on right now in discussions in Appalachia. . . . Was that something that you consciously wanted to write about those topics? Or did it just happen naturally as you were writing about the region?

[00:21:12] **Leah** Oh, yeah. I mean, I definitely wanted to write about out-migration. And I wound up not writing about it as much as I thought I would. Because, you know, that's part of our history is in-migration and out-migration and this idea of who's really from here and who really belongs. And when you live in a marginalized space, and you are then a marginalized person in some way, either, you know, because of cultural factors or religious factors or whatever it might be, or you're just non-normative in some way. . . . What is that experience like? And so I wanted definitely to. . . . Because that's been my experience of the place, and I know so many people who feel that pressure to leave, to come back. That's like an ongoing thing.

[00:21:58] **Leah** And I wanted very much to write about that and about the sense of belonging, but never quite fitting, because—for me—that's really what Appalachia is. And I tie that also to the fact that this is geologically one of the oldest, if not the oldest, geological places on Earth. Like one of the first things to pop up out of the primordial ooze was the Appalachian Mountains. And so that's why there's so much coal here. You know, it's just been here for billions of years. And so I think that's why people feel so tied to it and have that sense of, like, there's something ancient here. And there's something here that I can't get away from. But people also leave it all the time. And, yeah, it's a really important issue for everybody from the region, I think. So I wanted to. . . . I was very conscious of wanting to cover that in some way.

[00:22:45] **Kendra** Yeah, it's a topic that I think a lot of people who aren't from the region don't understand why it's a big deal. So, for example, where my husband is from, no one is from that town where he grew up. Like, they all migrated in from somewhere else. So everyone is equally not from there. But where I grew up, my family has been jumping back and forth across the Ohio River for, like, five generations. So we often don't feel like we belong anywhere. And in Appalachia, that is a huge deal. Like the worst sin you could do to your family is to leave. And having to describe that cultural difference to people when discussing Appalachia, it's really difficult because it's outside of their experience. They're like, why is this a big deal? People move all the time. And I'm like, you don't understand.

[00:23:33] **Leah** Yeah, well, especially when you think about it in terms of topography. Right? Like your holler, the sun rises later than it does everywhere else. And it might have a different species of, you know, salamander that you can't find anywhere else. Right? Like, there's all these. . . . And you're not necessarily conscious of those things, but there's—I believe, and I think that's why there's so much symbiosis between the characters and the environment in this book is because I believe that these things act on each other. And we really are so tied to it. And there's all kinds of. . . . Like I live in Asheville, right? And there's all kinds of like woo- woo crystal shops and people saying that you have to visit certain, you know, certain clefts in such-and-such mountain because that's where all the ancient energies pour out and stuff. But maybe there's something to that because you don't escape it. And I can be. . . . I mean, I've been in New Zealand and recognized and known somebody who was from this area, you know? And you talk to them, and there's just this understanding about what it means to leave, what it means to stay.

[00:24:38] **Kendra** And that's definitely a conversation, you know, when I go back home about that and the feeling of that. And it's interesting when you meet other people from your region. I had a conversation with someone who. . . . We were the same age, grew up in the same region, never met each other. And we met online. And she had a very bad experience growing up where I did and was very angry. And it was interesting because I say I'm Appalachian. And if you, you know, there's a lot of pressure to pass is not Appalachian and to blend in. And the fact that I was more out about it and wasn't shamed, ashamed about it was a big deal to her. And we had this conversation. And she basically just was like, I can't believe you're living this way, that you are . . . you say you're Appalachian. It was a very interesting conversation because so many young people are leaving the region. And we're all dealing with it in different ways. And so when I read your collection, there's a lot of themes about that. And you mentioned belonging and trying to find your place. And there's a story at the end where the POV character feels . . . like . . . she has a lot of internalized feelings about her own identity as an Appalachian. And just those seeing on the page, it was just like reading home. You know, that's the best way I can describe it.

[00:26:01] **Leah** Yeah, thanks for saying that. I really thought a lot about young people because I'm, you know, in my 40s. And I walk around Asheville now, where I spent my 20s, and it's so expensive, and it's so gentrified. And because Asheville's gotten so gentrified and because I see these very 21st century problems acting specifically on young people, economically especially, I wanted to really have. . . . I wanted to really listen to those people and talk to some people and try to get a sense of what the experience is for someone who's, you know, 20, 25, 30 in this region right now and what that feels like, what that pressure to stay or go feels like because I think it's always been here, but it's different now. And it's, in some ways, more emotional because there is so much ecological and environmental pressure that we didn't have before. So, yeah, I was just very conscious of the experience of younger 21st century Appalachians and how they're operating in this context of pressure to out-migrate or pressure to stay and help modern problems that are coming to a head in the region . . . are acting on them in new ways. It was very much a conscious part of the book.

[00:27:23] **Kendra** You know, I think it's interesting that you mention about young people because, reading a lot of Appalachian literature the last few years, there have been a lot more queer stories coming out of the region. And again, one of the common misconceptions is that there aren't any queer people in Appalachia. And I really appreciate

people like Rae Garringer, who has the Country Queers podcast, who are working on things like that. But you also have queer characters in your short story collection. So, for you, why was it so important to include those stories?

[00:27:59] **Leah** Oh, gosh. That's a long answer. So many reasons. I mean, just as a person, it's something that, you know, is really important to me and the experience of having people very, very, very, very close to me who are navigating being out in the mountains and of having grown up with that and having experienced some of it myself when I was much younger. But I think also you have to think about it in terms of what that means for this space specifically. Right? You're talking about a marginalized region. And you're talking about a place that has a lot of mis-gendering happening. This is not a masculine landscape. This is . . . this place is different. And it's feminine, and it's weird. And it's . . . there's so much celebration of non-normative behavior in this culture. Or at least it has been for me. Like, you know, I'm surrounded by big, beefy men that you might think are stereotypically Appalachian. And they kiss each other and call each other "Honey." I mean, that's just what you do if you're a Kentucky boy. You call your friends "Honey." Right? Like, that's . . . there's all these things that I think are part of the experience that don't get talked about enough.

[00:29:19] **Leah** And so, yeah, I think contemporary writers really see that as both indicative of their experience of the region, but also metaphorically it says a lot to think about queerness from a more broad perspective and a more allegorical perspective, that this is a space that's been misidentified and misunderstood. And one of the best ways to represent that in terms of just like literary device is to talk about people who are living in non-normative ways because the ecology here itself is living in non-normative ways. You know, I got matriarchal species in my backyard. So for me, it's operating on several levels. And yeah, there's some great books. Mesha Maren's book that just came out—her novel came out this year, or I guess it was last year—SUGAR RUN. That's another good example. Emma Eisenberg has that beautiful nonfiction book that came out right before the pandemic, THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL, which is fantastic. I really love Emma Eisenberg. And so, yeah, I think it's both. There's this new generation of writers from the region who are willing to talk about those experiences and willing to point out that that's been their dominant experience of Appalachia. And that it's so much more common than people realize. And also because, yeah, it's a great way to convey our oddness and our otherness and the landscapes having been "othered" by a patriarchy that has, you know, extracted from it and destroyed it in many ways.

[00:30:51] **Kendra** And there's an anthology that came out from West Virginia University Press, which is LGBTQ+ poetry and fiction from Appalachia, which I thought was very interesting and how it handled it in the different topics. And you could tell there's definitely a generational shift in the stories and who is writing what. And I recently also read Carter Sickels's book, THE PRETTIEST STAR, which is gorgeous. But it's a historical novel. And so.

[00:31:20] **Leah** Right. That's in the '80s. And then there Silas House, you know, who's sort of like one of the first people to just be like, "All right. I'm out. Here's Kentucky when you're out." You know. And he was doing that a long time ago. So I think a lot of credit goes to him that those newer, younger writers feel comfortable doing it.

[00:31:35] **Kendra** Yeah, it's definitely a process. I've definitely seen a shift in the culture, which has been really great to watch Appalachia literature evolve and change over time. And that's just been something I've really enjoyed reading and studying. I have an



Appalachian lit series on my BookTube channel, which is just like a hobby. But I read three books, and then I just talk about them in the episode. And it's just funny how you wouldn't think that these stories would be prominent because of the stereotypes that you're fed continuously. But they're actually very . . . there's just so many of them. And you just have to kind of lift the rock and look underneath and see what's there, which is pretty great.

[00:32:16] **Leah** Right! Well, and if you're even remotely curious about the region. . . . Because I think there are books that will let you be in-curious about Appalachia, right? There are plenty of books you can read about meth dealers and, you know, J.D. Vance's nonexistent cousins or whatever. And those will answer your questions. And then you never have to think about Appalachia again. But if you're really curious about it, and if you want to understand it, you cannot understand this place unless you listen to our Black poets. You cannot understand this place unless you read, you know, a novel about the Cherokee experience, like Annette Clapsaddle's book that's coming out in September. These are the dominant stories of this space, and they're just finally getting told.

[00:33:01] **Kendra** Is there anything that you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered yet?

[00:33:05] **Leah** I've talked about so many things that I've been thinking about. So many things. You know, I also think class is a really important subject. I see class and class-ism as being really tied to misconceptions about the region and really tied to how our environmental problems have happened and what a potential solution for them is. And I'm really aware of not wanting to write about what I would call rich people. When I say "rich people," everybody thinks I mean like rich, rich people. But the way I grew up, I think you're rich if you had stairs in your house.

[00:33:45] **Kendra** Yes.

[00:33:45] **Leah** You know. So. So when I say "rich people," I mean like the bourgeoisie. Right? So I don't like writing about those people. So. I don't find them interesting. So I was really. . . . I was very, very careful to try to write about what I saw, which is real people. As the great George Singleton says, real people doing the best they can.

[00:34:12] **Kendra** There was a line in one of the stories where a woman's father-in-law has this car wreck, and she . . . they go back home from Charleston to see him. And she tells someone that, you know, they have a big house with X amount of rooms in it. And I was like, I've literally heard people say that. That is the discussion of how are you established. Like, do you have a house? Like, are you there? And it's pretty interesting because a lot of people equate home ownership with middle class. But that's not necessarily the case. Same thing with education. And we know a lot of people have a college education, but they're still more income lower class, which is very much my family situation. And so I found it really interesting to see those dynamics in your stories and as they played out.

[00:35:07] **Leah** Yeah. Economic precarity is very real, especially for people who are first generation, like newly having bought their way into the lower middle class or who, you know, like me, the first person in their family to go to college. That's not the end of that story. Right? Like, you're always going to feel the precarity of that. Myself, my friends, my family. You know, you hoard money. You worry about being. . . . Anything could happen. Anything could happen. Anything could happen. And this could all go away. And you don't have the capital or the equity literally or emotionally to deal with financial strain if it comes,

even if it's brief. Yeah. That character that you're talking about, she's somebody who has made it out and who's aware that she's in a better situation. But emotionally, for her, it's still a very difficult situation. But, you know, you got to stick with where your bread's buttered. And I think a lot of people make decisions like that, overemphasizing that over their own emotional health. I see that a lot here. I see it in myself. I mean, I've done it, you know.

[00:36:10] **Kendra** So I talked to Sarah Moss, who is a writer from northern England. And she and I earlier this year had a fabulous conversation about how northern England and Appalachia have a lot of similarities in the different cultures.

[00:36:24] **Leah** Yes.

[00:36:25] **Kendra** So you would agree with that?

[00:36:27] **Leah** Oh, yeah, absolutely. And so I'm, yeah, I'm a British citizen as well as an American citizen. And I've spent a lot of time in the UK. And I really love the north of England. My favorite ex-boyfriend is from Huddersfield. So I won't date a man from the home counties. They've got to be a northern lad. So, uh. . . . Or anybody, frankly, I won't date anybody from home counties, let alone men. So, yeah, there's this same combination. And you can see it happening. Like, it's so topical, right? Because Brexit. Right? Brexit and Trump happened at the same time. And the northern counties and northern regions in England overwhelmingly voted for Brexit, even though those had been traditionally union labor bastions. Right? This is where . . . this was the spine. The backbone of the labor movement in Britain was in those northern mines and in those northern factories. And they've just been. . . . They've had the same thing happen to them. Thatcher and Reagan happened at the same time. And Reagan, you know, busted all the unions. Thatcher busted all her unions in the UK. And the gradual process of the watering down of the labor movement in Britain and this kind of rise of this new conservatism that's so toxic have been simultaneous in both countries. And I've watched it in both places. And it's been infuriating.

[00:37:58] **Leah** And so when the 2016 election happened, I kind of figured that what happened was going to happen because it was the same rural urban divide, the same abandonment of labor movements, the same disdain for rural working people was happening in this country and in Britain at the same time. And the result of that is it's not that those people all voted for Brexit or all voted for Trump. It's just that they all shared a bitterness and an awareness of the powers of that country were moving past them and telling them that they were being . . . that they were behind in some way when really they weren't. And that frustration and that dichotomy and that cognitive dissonance, I think is a big part of why we are where we are in both places.

[00:38:54] **Kendra** I just find that absolutely fascinating. Well, the last question I have for you today is what other books by Appalachian writers would you recommend for our listeners?

[00:39:05] **Leah** Oh, gosh, there's so many. So let's see, we talked about Annette Clapsaddle's book, which is coming out in September, *EVEN AS WE BREATHE*. That's a great book. I love Emma Eisenberg's *THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL*. I can't recommend that one highly enough. David Joy has a new book coming out in August called *WHEN THESE MOUNTAINS BURN*, which is, I think, his best book. And it's specifically about the forest fires that we went through in the fall of 2016. Silas House has got some rereleases

of his older books coming out. And then, yeah, Carter Sickels's *THE PRETTIEST STAR* is just a lovely book that reminds me so much of my childhood. And if you're if you're Gen-X, it's like the mixtape that you find in your old car right before you sell it. Like, oh, my god, I remember this. So, yeah, I highly recommend all those books.

[00:39:57] **Kendra** Well, thank you so much, Leah, for coming on the podcast today and talking all things Appalachia with me.

[00:40:02] **Leah** Thank you so much for having me.

[00:40:07] **Kendra** So I'd like to thank Leah Hampton for talking with me about her debut short story collection, *F\*CKFACE: AND OTHER STORIES*, which is out now from Henry Holt. You can find her on Twitter (@pludger)—it'll be linked in our show notes—and on her website, [leahkhampton.com](http://leahkhampton.com). I'd also like to say a special thank you to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. You can find Reading Women at [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com) and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). Thanks so much for listening.