

Interview with Naima Coster

[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 Naima Coster, the author of *HALSEY STREET*, which is out now from Little A. For a full transcript of this conversation, check out the episode's show notes on readingwomenpodcast.com. And make sure you're subscribed so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:39] **Kendra** So this is the second episode in a series of interviews that Reading Women is doing in partnership with the Miami Book Fair. The Miami Book Fair is all online this year. And you can go check out. There are dozens and dozens of events with, I believe, two hundred or more authors. And you can find that at miamibookfaironline.com. And you can log in and register to go watch all of these amazing events, see all the authors that are going to be there, buy these authors' books, et cetera, et cetera. So thanks to them for working with us on these interviews.

[00:01:22] **Kendra** So we partnered with them, and I am talking to several of the Five Under Thirty-Five honorees that were announced from the National Book Foundation. And we've already talked to C Pam Zhang earlier this year. K-Ming Chang's interview went up last week. And this week I am talking to Naima Coster. So Naima is the author of two novels. Her debut, *HALSEY STREET*, was a finalist for the 2018 Kirkus Prize for Fiction and was longlisted for the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award. It was recommended as a must-read by People, Essence, BitchMedia, Well-Read Black Girl, theSkimm, and the Brooklyn Public Library, among others. Her forthcoming novel, *WHAT'S MINE AND YOURS*, will be published in March 2021. And like I mentioned earlier, she was announced this year as one of the National Book Foundation's Five Under Thirty-Five honorees for 2020.

[00:02:19] **Kendra** So we talk about her novel, *HALSEY STREET*, which is her debut. And it's about a young woman named Penelope. Her dad is African American, and her mother is Dominican. And so it very much deals with her relationship with her mother, who has left and gone back to the Dominican, leaving her father alone. And so Penelope eventually moves back home to Brooklyn from where she was living in Pittsburgh. And when she gets back to Brooklyn, she is faced with the effects of gentrification on the neighborhood where she comes from and also caring for her father, who is very ill. And so this book looks at the relationship of a family, of a mother and daughter. There are so many things that this book tackles, and it's an incredible book to listen to as well. Bahni Turpin narrates it. And she is, of course, a superstar of audiobook narrators. So it was wonderful. So I would definitely recommend. All right. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Naima Coster.

[00:03:29] **Kendra** Well, thank you so much, Naima, for coming on the podcast today. I can't wait to chat about your, I guess, books now with you.

[00:03:37] **Naima** Thank you, Kendra. I'm so happy to be here with you.

[00:03:41] **Kendra** I imagine a lot has been going on. You were recently named a Five Under Thirty-Five honoree by the National Book Foundation. So congratulations.

[00:03:50] **Naima** Thank you so much. That was such an honor and really thrilling to be in the company of the other writers who were selected.

[00:03:58] **Kendra** It was a fabulous list. And it's just something that brought me so much joy during this year. Besides that going on. What are some other things that have really been bringing you joy or giving you life while everything is . . . well as it is in 2020?

[00:04:19] **Naima** Yeah, well, I have a toddler, my daughter. And she has been bringing me a lot of joy, just her attentiveness to life. She's really into bees and flowers and trees. So we spend a lot of time together outside and she really encourages me to slow down and pay attention to things. And reading has been a great comfort to me. Just finding a little bit of time at the end of each day to be with myself and to be with a book and be transported to some other life beyond sort of this COVID life and the turbulence of these times has been a great relief at the end of each day when I manage to do it and don't immediately fall asleep.

[00:05:07] **Kendra** Yeah, it's always nice to have those moments where you just can breathe. You know, I feel sometimes I'm so tense, I forget to even, like, just calm down and sit and just breathe for a moment. And usually that happens with a great book as well. So they are sustaining.

[00:05:23] **Naima** Yeah, I find it hard to slow down. And I think that the reading really focuses my mind and helps me move a little farther away from all of my kind of anxious thoughts and worries.

[00:05:38] **Kendra** So what have been some of your favorite books that you have read recently? I normally ask this at the end of the interview, but I feel like we are right here with all the joy for reading.

[00:05:50] **Naima** Yeah! Books I've read recently that I really loved have included *WANT* by Lynn Steger Strong, which is just a terrific book about being broke, being a mother living in New York City, and living a different kind of life than you felt entitled to or thought was possible for you. I loved that book. It was quick and just furious and emotionally charged. I loved *THE VANISHING HALF* by Brit Bennett, which I just finished. And I also loved her book, *THE MOTHERS*. She just has such an elegant way of bringing us close to different characters and their complicated web of relationships. So I loved that book as well.

[00:06:40] **Kendra** Those books are really incredible. I guess my most recent read is actually your book, *HALSEY STREET*, which is your debut. It came out a few years ago. And I always love asking authors about their debut book and how they kind of got their foot in the door and got their first story into reader's hands. So how long were you working on *HALSEY STREET*? And how did it find a home at Little A?

[00:07:07] **Naima** I was working on *HALSEY STREET* for four years before I sold it. So I started working on it before my MFA, when I was in a graduate program for English. And then I kept working on it in my MFA. And while I was a graduate student, I published an essay called "Remembering When Brooklyn Was Mine," which was about returning to the neighborhood that I grew up in in Brooklyn, New York—a neighborhood called Fort Greene—and seeing how it had been rapidly gentrified and kind of negotiating what it was like to come back a changed person, so to come back a graduate of a university of kind of a strong reputation and to find that I had changed and that my neighborhood was changing. And sort of, I was connected to people in the neighborhood who were sort of feeling left behind by the changes, like family and friends. But then I was also connected to newcomers like my classmates who moved to Fort Greene because it was hip and were

able to get apartments of their own, although I couldn't afford to live anywhere other than my parents' apartment.

[00:08:21] **Naima** And so after publishing that essay, my agent found me and said, well, do you have a book? And I was twenty-four at the time, and I said, no, I don't have a book. And she said, Well, when you write one, let me know. And I thought that some of the themes that came up in that essay could be explored in a novel through the different experiences of different characters. And that was sort of the seed for HALSEY STREET. And so I started the book shortly after that. And it took four years to finish it. And then I circled back to that same agent. And she read the book and loved it. And she's still my agent today. And that was the way that I found her and that the book began to make its way into the world. But it felt like a long journey from writing the book to publication. It was probably around six or seven years. So it took . . . it took a long time from when I first began to when it actually reached readers.

[00:09:27] **Kendra** Well, it's definitely time well spent. The book is really beautiful. And from the first page, I was immediately drawn in to the story. As I was reading, I was trying to pinpoint why I just fell in love with your writing and the kind of storytelling. And for me, I think it's how your book has a deep connection to place. And some of my favorite books are books like that. And for you, being from Brooklyn, you bring that alive. And you also have that contrast of that the main character is coming back after a period of time away. And so that gives her perspective of being from there, but also seeing how it's changed, just like you mentioned your experience. Can you talk about a little bit more about how that perspective influenced the way that you told Penelope's story?

[00:10:24] **Naima** Yeah, well, I think that kind of having this outsider and insider status is something that I was able to share with the character of Penelope. So, you know, she's unlike her father, Ralph, who is definitely part of an old guard in the neighborhood in Bed-Stuy Brooklyn, where the book is set. So he's of a different generation. He's a Black man who's going through a lot of difficulties in his life, whose record store has closed and been replaced with a business that's more palatable to the newcomers. So she doesn't quite occupy his position because she's young, and she went away to art school, although she never graduated. But she doesn't quite occupy the position of the newcomers who she rents a room from either, the Harpers, who aren't from New York City, who aren't from Brooklyn, who are white, who are wealthy, who are parents. And so she's got this distance from the other major players in the book in Brooklyn. But she's also deeply connected to them because she's her father's daughter and because she's living in the same house as this new family. And I thought that that was such an interesting position from which to make observations and comment on what it's like to be in a neighborhood that has this mix of people and is in the midst of a change that's often tense and difficult and uncertain. But it also just created a lot of really wonderful, dramatic potential because what happens to her father and what happens to the people that she lives with and what happens between her and these others deeply matters to her life.

[00:12:16] **Kendra** And there's a lot of interesting . . . I guess the word would be "symbolism" between the two houses that she lives. It's like she's almost physically moving back and forth between her past and her present and trying to figure out how those two things exist at the same time in her own mind as she returns and kind of settles back into her life in Brooklyn.

[00:12:40] **Naima** Yeah, and it's interesting because neither quite feels like home, although those are the places that she has for much of the book. And so I think one of the questions

that the book is asking is how do we find our place? How does a young woman like Penelope find her place when her neighborhood is changing and she doesn't cleanly fit into any community in her neighborhood, but also when her family has changed and there's been so much lost. And she's no longer a child; she's a young woman who is still reckoning with some of the losses that she experienced as a child.

[00:13:24] **Kendra** And you've mentioned in other interviews that you like to give your characters space on the page to make mistakes, to kind of figure themselves out. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what that means for you as you were writing this novel?

[00:13:42] **Naima** Yeah, I really wanted to write characters who felt real and recognizable to us, even uncomfortably so. So Penelope's father, Ralph, is deeply sad and deeply stuck. And everything he's lost—his record store, his wife, his position of status. And so he complains a lot and is really stuck in his own grief in a way that I think is . . . can be really true to what it's like to struggle with grief and a loss that is difficult to accept or even impossible to accept. But I wanted to render that, even if it might not be concise or something that a reader wanted to confront. Just like a person might not want to confront seeing a loved one continue to obsess and fixate on the loss, right? We might want our loved one to get over it, but that's not always possible . . . or possible on our timeline. And the way that we have to sit with that in real life, I wanted us to have to sit with it in the novel. So that's true of Ralph, and it's also true of Penelope, who's a young woman who feels a lot of rage. And so I wanted to give her space to be angry in the book and maybe angry in a way that we don't expect characters in the novel to behave. Like there's a part in the book where Penelope kicks a trash can, which is surely unbecoming behavior of a heroine in the novel and we might even say of a woman on a New York City street. But I wanted to give her the space to do that because I do think that the book is in part about the ways that we find of expressing difficult feelings or inexpressible feelings. And sometimes the ways we do that aren't appealing or fashionable or palatable or the kinds of things we expect from a work of literary fiction.

[00:15:42] **Kendra** Yeah, I feel like you convey so much empathy in the story for her experience. Her mom has left she and her dad. And her dad has had an injury and is really struggling with that. And I think this is something that a lot of millennials are now starting to think about more as our parents grow older. I grew up in a house where my parents were caring for their parents, and so my grandparents would live with us or different things. And so that's something that I always knew would happen to my parents just from watching it. But it's interesting to see more and more conversations, whether that be in the media or in literature, about caring for parents. Do you think there's anything unique to Penelope's experience, being a millennial who's moving back at this particular time that you really wanted to capture in this novel?

[00:16:39] **Naima** I really wanted to capture sort of the weight of familial obligation. And I wanted to capture that for someone who has creative interests, who wants to be a visual artist. And I also wanted to capture it for a young woman of color who doesn't have quite a lot of money. And, you know, I think that in some ways the book is about achievement. Like it's about Penelope's shame that she hasn't achieved more. It's about the status that the Harpers have achieved by buying this beautiful house in an up-and-coming neighborhood. It's about kind of the achievement of the record store and what it meant for the neighborhood and how Ralph is grieving now that it's gone. And I wanted to show how everything that Penelope is carrying from the wound of her difficult relationship with her mother to the responsibilities of caring for her father physically and also emotionally really

affects her ability to focus on herself and be selfish in the way perhaps that artists must be selfish to some degree to create.

[00:17:51] **Naima** And one of the most moving things that I heard from a reader about the book was a millennial woman who contacted me to say that the book made her want to be kinder to herself and less hard on herself for not achieving more because it reflected back to her just how much she was carrying and how much her responsibilities towards her family, her parents, the ways that she cared for them was something that took up energy and time and was part of, kind of, the whole picture of what she was able to achieve. And so I'm very proud of that. And I think that that's important. And I don't know if it's just my circle of friends or millennials in general or our culture, where there's this sort of obsession with achievement or with excellence and great shame about not, kind of, having a sufficient amount of achievement or excellence or comparable levels to one's peers or whatever it might be, without recognizing the fullness of our lives and all of the things that we're working on and that our energies are devoted to that maybe aren't flashy or admirable.

[00:19:07] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I'm from a working-class background, and I think that's definitely something of our millennial experience being that we're . . . what . . . the first generation that's going to, I guess, overall be worse off than the previous one. And it's really difficult not to compare yourself. But then you're like, well, you know, that person had a private-school education and had a full ride to whatever school it was while I was on work scholarship, right? So it's all of these differing factors that go into that. And I had so much feeling for Penelope in this in that—especially there's this scene where her new boss is like saying she's such a success story, and she feels like an imposter, like, what am I doing here? Like, what is this like? What do you mean she thinks I'm a success story? Like, does she know me? Like, what is this? And I was like, I feel you girl. Just you know. It's almost like you want to wrap her in a warm hug and just say it'll be okay. Just breathe for a moment, you know.

[00:20:15] **Naima** Yeah. And how, you know, that success story doesn't feel true to her. But I think that one of the things that Penelope longs for in the book—that all the characters are longing for in the book—is actually just connection and intimacy. So even being told that she's a success story, not only does she not think it's true, it's not actually the kind of affirmation that would be freeing for Penelope. You know, like she doesn't actually need the book to tell her she's a great artist and a virtuoso. She just actually just wants some kind of connection.

[00:20:56] **Kendra** Your book looks at gentrification, specifically in Brooklyn. And I feel like there have been a lot of outlets that have kind of parachuted in and kind of just told the story. And I don't really often hear about it on a national scale from people actually from Brooklyn, which you would think would be obvious that that's something . . . that those are stories needing to be told. What was something that you wanted to bring to the discussion of gentrification that might be missing from people who aren't from the area? Were there any gaps that you really wanted to fill or something that you specifically wanted to tackle in the novel?

[00:21:37] **Naima** I love this question. And I think that it's a real problem that there isn't a wider platform provided for people directly affected by gentrification. And I think it is a problem related to privilege. Right? Like, I do think that writers or people who grew up in Brooklyn talking about how Brooklyn has been gentrified is rarer than it should be. And it's certainly rarer than newcomers to Brooklyn crafting narratives about Brooklyn, whether

that's the HBO show "Girls" or a novel. Right? How many novels are set in gentrified Brooklyn without any acknowledgment of the gentrification that's occurring and shaping lives? And I was only able to publish my piece because I was in grad school, and I had a teacher who said, I want to send this to my editor at The New York Times. And so it was that privilege and that connection that enabled me to tell my story. And I think that that's a problem and that there's a silence that I wanted to write into.

[00:22:50] **Naima** And so one of the things that I wanted to challenge with the book was the idea that gentrification is inevitable and there's nothing that can be done about it because I've heard that a lot. Sort of like, life is about change. Cities change. Everything changes. If you love any place long enough, you'll lose the things you love about it. And while there may be some truth to that, it felt like an easy way to gloss over the real pain and the losses and to sort of not have to sit with the implications of large-scale actions by governments and developers or even individual actions when we think about where we live and which shops we patronize and how we treat our neighbors. And so I wanted to make those losses and tensions felt and real. Right? Like gentrification isn't just a buzzword. It's the life of a man like Ralph. It's a life of a young woman like Penelope and other characters in the book, the students at her school. So that the reader could pause and instead of using any of those easy ideas or clichés about gentrification to avoid thinking about it, to be invited to step deeper into the questions of the book and even maybe to locate themselves and say like, well, what do I have in common with the Harpers who moved into this neighborhood? Or what do I have in common with Ralph? Or Penelope? Or John, who she meets later in the book? Because I think that that kind of self reflection can be really powerful and change the ways that we live in the world.

[00:24:31] **Kendra** There's this moment in the book where Penelope is talking to her landlord. Her landlords are a married couple, so she's talking to the husband in that relationship. And he's talking about how he feels disconnected from the neighborhood and different things. And she says, well, if you were really concerned about the neighborhood, you wouldn't have moved here. But since you're already here, like, it's almost like make the most of it, like try to actually benefit the neighborhood rather than . . . she didn't use these words . . . but like leeching off the neighborhood. And I think that that was a really just honest conversation and really almost kind of set the tone for a lot of discussion and later in the book. And a lot happens that I won't give spoilers for. But it was just something that stayed in my head in this conversation about gentrification and what happens when you've already moved in and you realize what you've done. Like, what do you do? And she gives her own perspective as someone who is from there, which is definitely memorable, I think.

[00:25:33] **Naima** Yeah, I'm glad that that moment spoke to you. And, you know, I wasn't interested in using the book to assign blame because I think something like gentrification is much larger than individual choices. Individual choices are certainly a part of it, but there are much larger pressures at work. But I did want to kind of encourage being critical and critical of the narratives that we have and that we tell ourselves. And I think all of the characters in this book are mistaken quite a lot in their thinking. They're thinking about themselves. And they're thinking about one another. And there's a way that that's so much easier to recognize in a book than, say, when we're at a party or having a conversation with someone, and we don't take a step back to really think about what it is that we're saying and what we might be defending with what we're saying.

[00:26:33] **Kendra** Well, I really loved the whole story in this book. And your writing is beautiful. And I mean, it really just captured my attention in this very vibrant kind of way.

You have another book coming out, which I'm very excited for. Normally, when I read a person's book, I'm reading it when it first comes out, and I have to wait a year or two before the next book. But you have a book coming out in March.

[00:26:58] **Naima** Yeah.

[00:26:59] **Kendra** So before I let you go, I want to ask you about that book and what you can tell us about it.

[00:27:06] **Naima** Yeah, I'm so excited about my forthcoming book. It's a novel called WHAT'S MINE AND YOURS. And it'll be published on March 2nd. So just a few months away. And it's another family story that's deeply about place. But the family in the story are quite different. So it's set in a city in North Carolina where a local public high school is being integrated in the early 2000s. So there's an initiative that's bringing Black students from the east side of town into mostly white, wealthier schools on the west side of town. And the book follows two families whose children come into contact at the school. One family is headed by a woman named Jade, and she's worried about her son, Gee, who is a sensitive, anxious, young Black man who's going to be enrolled at the school. And then the other family is also headed by a mother, a white woman named Lacey May, who is really worried about the future of her three daughters because she's sort of . . . she's been wronged by her husband, who's an erratic but charming man. And so she's really opposed to the integration and what it might mean for her daughters who are half Latina.

[00:28:27] **Naima** And the book focuses on these families and the ways that they find their way through the integration and then what also happens to the children in the years long after the integration of the school. So it spans three decades and follows Lacey May's three daughters and Jade's son and then also the two mothers over the course of many years. And it was such a pleasure to write all of these characters and their relationships between each other. So the book looks at difficult sibling relationships, the relationships between mother and child, the relationship between partners. And I think it builds on kind of my interest in HALSEY STREET but moves to a totally different geography and set of characters, which was really thrilling and a pleasure for me. And I lived in North Carolina for many years. And so I was kind of absorbing the place the whole time I was there. And then I then started the novel shortly after I left the state.

[00:29:29] **Kendra** I live in South Carolina. And so I'm always here for a good Carolina story and a family story at that. So very excited.

[00:29:37] **Naima** Yeah!

[00:29:37] **Kendra** I'll be sure to link preorder links for that in our show notes so people can go preorder your next book. But thank you so much for coming on the show today and talking about your book with me.

[00:29:49] **Naima** Thank you for having me. And thank you so much for all of your kind words about HALSEY STREET. They're a gift for me to hear. So thank you for offering them.

[00:30:01] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Naima Coster for talking with me about her debut novel, HALSEY STREET, which is out now from Little A. You can find her on her website, naimacoster.com and on her Twitter and Instagram (@naimacoster). And I will link those down in the show notes so you can go find them. 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 and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). Thanks so much for listening.