**Interview with Quan Barry**

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Quan Barry about her latest novel, WE RIDE UPON STICKS, which is out now in paperback from Vintage. You can find a complete transcript of our conversation over on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:37] **Kendra** So like I mention in the beginning of this interview, I chose this book as my first read of 2021. I originally heard about it from Liberty Hardy on the *All The Books* podcast, which is one of my favorite book podcasts. And I was so delighted by her joy about this book. And then Pantheon so kindly sent me a copy. And it sat there on my TBR shelf, judging me for not reading it, of course, like all unread books do. You know what I'm talking about. And then I saw actually Books and LaLa talk about it as her favorite book of 2020. And I decided then and there that it was finally time. And so I'm so delighted that this was the first book that I read in 2021. It's a really hilarious book but also has a lot of heft to it. And I really appreciated the skill that Quan Barry put into this book. I just really loved this experience of a whole new kind of '80s nostalgia that has a lot more sharpness to it and doesn't romanticize over the real problems that the '80s had. So really love that about this book.

[00:01:58] **Kendra** So a little bit about Quan Barry before we get started. Born in Saigon and raised on Boston's north shore, Quan Barry is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of four poetry books; her third book, WATER PUPPETS, won the AWP Donald Hall Prize for poetry and was a PEN/Open Book finalist. She has received the NEA fellowships in both fiction and poetry. And her work has appeared in such publications as *Ms.* and *The New Yorker*. Barry lives in Wisconsin. So without further ado, here is my conversation with Quan Barry.

[00:02:50] **Kendra** Welcome to the podcast, Quan, I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:02:53] **Quan** Fabulous. Thanks for having me.

[00:02:56] **Kendra** I don't know if the author world has this, but the bookish media world has a very prominent superstition about the first book someone reads in a year. It's supposed to set the tone. And so I actually chose your book for the very first book of the year. And it was perfect. Like, you know, I normally don't go for this superstition. But after 2020, I was like, I'll take what I can get, you know? So it was a delightful start to the New Year.

[00:03:24] **Quan** Yeah. I don't remember what the first book was I read this year. I'm like, uh oh. I tend to read pretty dramatic fiction, so I'm hoping it wasn't FIGHT CLUB. I read FIGHT CLUB pretty early. So hopefully that wasn't the first book of the year.

[00:03:36] **Kendra** You know, that would make for a very interesting year. But this book actually is out now in paperback. It has this beautiful pink cover. It screams '80s nostalgia, which is perfect. Perfect mood for it. But you released the hardback at the beginning of the pandemic. So what has that been like for you, doing the hardback tour and now doing the paperback tour for this book?

[00:04:01] **Quan** Yeah, so my book was actually published on March 3rd again.

[00:04:05] **Kendra** Oh my.

[00:04:06] **Quan** And so I feel actually really lucky. I was able to. . . . It was like nine days before the world did officially shut down, so that meant that I got to give a really . . . a reading here in Madison, Wisconsin, where I live. I got to have a big party. And it was an '80s party, and all my friends were all dressed up. And it was a lot of fun. And then I flew to New York, and I did maybe a couple of things in New York. And then I went to Massachusetts. I went to Danvers, my hometown, where the book is set. And I actually gave a reading at the Danvers Historical Society. And I also got a chance to go back to my high school. And then after I did those things—and I think that was on March 11th or March 12th, I'm not exactly sure—the very next day, the governor of Massachusetts shut everything down. So I really just got in under the wire. And I felt really fortunate, too, that nobody at any of my events got sick from the event or anything like that. So I felt really just lucky in that sense.

[00:05:01] **Quan** But it did mean that I had to evolve in certain kinds of ways. So, for example, on my book, there's. . . . On the hardcover, there's a picture of me as a child. And I, generally speaking, I don't use author photos. I've always tried to keep as small a cyber footprint as possible, which sounds kind of counterintuitive because usually if you're a writer or an artist, you want to be out there in the world. You want people to know about you. But I just . . . that's not how I roll. You know, I've never used Facebook. I don't use Twitter. I'm not on any kind of social media. And so when my book tour was canceled, I had to make a decision that I could either kind of stay a hermit and choose to have as small a cyber footprint as possible. Or again, I would have to evolve. And so I decided, well, it is . . . this world is what it is. And so, basically, I ended up doing a lot more events, either using Zoom, you know, through libraries or bookstores . . . or podcasts or whatever. So normally, I would just be happy to just give readings actually in person and to not have to do that many things that entail, you know, online ways of reaching people. But like I said, it's a new world. And so I've had to do that.

[00:06:14] **Kendra** I watched one of your events where you had a video at the beginning of the call. And it was like this little intro video. And your presentation for that event was incredible. It was like, I feel like you like successfully, definitely for sure, adapted to the like Zoom book event because it was just such a unique experience.

[00:06:36] **Quan** Yeah, I actually had that video. . . . I showed it actually. . . . I made it before the pandemic. I remember many years ago, people were talking about book trailers. And it's funny because I'm not really into a lot of the sort of trends that a lot of authors are into, which I'm not mocking. It's just not my thing. So, for example, people having, like, book cover reveals and doing all kinds of things. I mean, I think it's fun. But like I said, it's just not me. But when I heard that there were book trailers—and again, this was years ago—I was like, "Ohh," because I'm into movies, and I'm into visuals. And I was like, "Yeah! I really want a book trailer." When I talked about it with my press, they're like, "Uh, book trailers were kind of like 2015. People really aren't doing them anymore." I was like, "Oh." So I went ahead myself with my very limited iMovie skills. And I just created my own kind of like video. So I don't really think it's a book trailer necessarily. But it's a video that tells you about the book. So I had that right from the get-go. And again, the few events that I got a chance to do in person, I actually would open by showing that. And I do think you're right, though. I think that once things moved to the Zoom format, I do think that little video really did translate really well because sometimes. . . . You know, it's one thing like when you're in person, it's exciting to hear the author read and those kinds of things. But on Zoom, I find that sometimes it can be a little deadly just because we're on Zoom for so many of us—not for everybody, but for many of us—we're on Zoom just so much and just looking at floating heads. So I think that the video just kind of helps break it up. And it's just kind of a little bit more engaging. So I was lucky to already have had that video existing even before the pandemic hit.

[00:08:08] **Kendra** Yeah, and it's pretty fabulous. You have the most amazing end papers in your book that is a map of New England and particularly around Salem and Danvers, where the book is set. And I found that very helpful. I am a map girl. I love maps. And so I love that visual. And it worked really well in the video. And that way you also got a taste of the book's feel as an object, which for me is always important with book design and different things and what that communicates to readers before they even start reading. And I really love that.

[00:08:42] **Quan** Yeah. You know, I was actually asked. . . . I did a public radio in New York City. And the interviewer had asked me specifically about my author photo, which again, I don't generally use. But like I said, it's an author photo of me as a kid. I was definitely thinking in terms of like just exactly what you're talking about, the idea of establishing a tone before you even dive into the book. And so the map, the kinds of things that are included on the map definitely set a tone. You know, like we get the Danvers Carrot, or the Danvers Onion, or . . . you know . . . the Golden Banana—which is a strip club. Or, you know, these kinds of things. And then I also think that the photo of me as a child is kind of funny, and it's a little bit humorous. And it also shows that, like, I definitely grew up in Danvers because here I am dressed in this old Danvers outfit and doing a very Danvers thing. Right? So, yeah, I'm a real fan of, like I said, establishing through just the materiality of the book, you know, tone as much as possible.

[00:09:40] **Kendra** And that leads perfectly into the book. It is a very, very funny book., I just sat there and laughed the entire time I was listening to the audiobook. And it's about a young women's hockey team at this high school in 1989. And it has all of this incredible nostalgia. And there's like fantastical elements to it and girls team and that kind of camaraderie there. There's so much going on in this book. How did this idea really start for you of writing the story of this particular women's hockey team? And also taking it with that unique, kind of fantastical, witchy vibe to it?

[00:10:25] **Quan** So I should point out first and foremost that it's a field hockey team. Because it's true that in other places in the United States, where there's a distinction between hockey. . . . If you say hockey, hockey is ice hockey.

[00:10:35] **Kendra** Okay.

[00:10:37] **Quan** Yeah, field hockey is, again, it's a different beast. Right? And so I myself played field hockey. The town that I grew up in had a really strong tradition and really strong teams. So even when I was like in junior high, I was always aware of the fact the high school girls teams were doing really well. And oftentimes there would be conference champions. And there were also girls who sometimes would get like full scholarships to go to college because, again, we just had a really strong field hockey program.

[00:11:04] **Quan** And so, you know, my training is I have my MFA, and I was trained primarily as a poet. So the first four books that I ever published were all poetry books. And then I published my first novel in 2015. And I published this novel, WE RIDE UPON STICKS in 2020. And so my my work before this is not humorous at all. My poetry books are not funny. They tend to deal with trauma, historical traumas, all kinds of things. My first novel is set in Vietnam and talks about the idea of what happened in that country both before what the Vietnamese call "The American War" and afterwards.

[00:11:47] **Quan** So when I started to write this book, I figured out pretty quickly that it was going to be a comedy, and that was just because of the different elements involved. So you have the 1980s. You have field hockey. And you have witchcraft. And I'm like, you put those together, and I just . . . I couldn't imagine writing a serious book. To me, it just made sense that it would be a comedy. And thinking about it, I have for a very long time had this idea about women's sports and about mothers and daughters and wanting to explore that more. So it's true that in my two earliest poetry books, there are poems that you can find that I kind of think of like. . . . You know people talk about the Ur-Hamlet, that maybe there was a text that Shakespeare wrote before Hamlet. I think of these poems as sort of being like the Ur-We Ride Upon Sticks. For example, there's one that talks about field hockey. And it's about a mother and a daughter and how the mother wouldn't go to the daughter's field hockey games because she thought they were too violent.

[00:12:39] **Quan** You know, there are also poems that I have in these two collections that have to do with the Salem witch trials, which I've always been fascinated with because, again, the Salem witch trials. . . . Salem in 1692 was much bigger than it currently is. And there was a section of it called Salem Village, which eventually became the town of Danvers. And that's where I was raised. And a lot of the things that happened that sparked the Salem witch trials actually began in Salem Village, which again became Danvers. And so I've always been fascinated with that history, specifically in thinking about the girls. Like why would these teen girls back then accuse people of being witches, knowing full well that it could mean that these people could end up dead? Like, why would they do that? And so I was interested in thinking about taking the same landscape—this is Danvers; this is where it happened—and thinking about a group of teen girls three hundred years later. What kinds of trouble would they get into? What kinds of things would they do in an attempt to have agency in their own lives as they're coming of age? What kinds of mischief would they get up to? Etc., etc. So I always knew for a very long time that I wanted to write a book about Danvers and the Salem witch trial and the history of that. And sports, again, has always been an important thing to me. So it just made sense to sort of combine all those things into one.

[00:13:56] **Kendra** And you mentioned that you were on the field hockey team and, you know, this is set in a very real place. Was that intimidating, writing about a place that's very much on your home turf, as it were, with people—very real people—who lived in the area would also read this book? What was your process, your process for that? And just kind of wrapping your mind around that and choosing what approach you'd take to the novel?

[00:14:20] **Quan** Yeah, it wasn't intimidating for the most part. I actually before I even wrote, before I even started to write the book, I had been thinking that actually maybe I was going to set the book in Salem, which obviously still exists. Right? And I was talking to a friend of mine who's also from the north shore. And I was like, you know, I'm thinking about writing this book about field hockey and Salem and the 1980s. But the truth of the matter is because I grew up in Danvers—I did not grow up in Salem—I just don't know that much about the ins and outs of like where teen kids were hanging out in Salem in the 1980s. But I know everything about Danvers because obviously that's where I grew up. And my friend said to me, she's like, "Well, why don't you just set the book in Danvers?" And I was like, "Because nobody knows the history of the Salem witch trials and how Danvers fits into that." And my friend was like, "Well, why don't you tell them?" And when she said that, it's like a light went on. It was like, oh my god, of course she's right.

[00:15:12] **Quan** So by setting the book in Danvers, it meant that I didn't have to do a lot of research, really, because I had lived this in certain kinds of ways. So I didn't have to know things about Salem, like where did teen kids go to party? Or where did teen kids eat pizza? Or where did teen kids go to the mall? Or those kinds of things. So it really opened up a whole world for me. Lastly, I will just say that recently I was talking to my sister on a Zoom. And she mentioned that some friends of hers who went to our high school had told her that they had read my book and that one of them was really upset, I guess, about my portrayal of the cross-country team. And so, you know, it's funny to me because you only see the cross-country team in the book, like, seriously, they get like three sentences total. And it's true, they don't come off that great. They come . . . basically, they're described as being like really smart, but nerdy. You know. Which is kind of who the cross-country kids were. And so it's just funny. I never thought about that aspect of things. Like, you know, whether or not people would read this and be like, "Oh! That's just not true!" Or, "I can't believe we were portrayed like this!".

[00:16:14] **Quan** I did think about it in terms of, for example, the teachers and the police officers. . . . Because it's true—and it says in the author's note in the back—that this is a comedic work, right? That's what I'm up to. So, you know, the fact that the teachers all kind of come across as a little bit bumbling and so do the police, like I said, it's a comedy. It's not meant to degrade anybody. But, you know, I did have a little disclaimer in there that, again, it's a work of comedy. And that I hope that people read it through that particular lens.

[00:16:41] **Kendra** And it is an incredible, incredibly funny book. Especially, I think on audio, the audiobook narrator does a great job with comedic timing and different things. So it makes it definitely an experience with that. You mention that you hadn't really written a funny book before, hadn't done much humor writing. What was the particular challenge for you of wanting to write that? You said a lot of it came naturally, but was there anything that you really kind of struggled to make fit? Because it looks very effortless. But of course, that means a lot of work went into it.

[00:17:15] **Quan** No, actually, I would argue it was kind of effortless. The thing is what's happening now is I'm working on another book that I actually have due in to my editor pretty soon. And it goes back to what I . . . my normal voice. So the book that I'm working on actually follows a group of Buddhist monks in Mongolia who go looking for a reincarnation. And that book is not a comedy at all. And so actually, that is harder for me than the voice, the comedic voice in WE RIDE UPON STICKS. In many ways, you know, friends of mine, people I work with, you know, I think would maybe—I don't know; nobody's ever said it to me—but they might recognize the voice in WE RIDE UPON STICKS because it's kind of the voice that I use in my emails, you know, like, just to friends. Or back in the world, back when we could travel, you know, I've been fortunate to travel a lot. And I used to send these kind of travel missives, you know, out to family and friends. And they were funny. And so people liked to read them. They were long emails, but people would read them because they were funny. And I'd be talking about what I was up to, you know, wherever. And so that actually in many ways is my natural voice. And so the truth of the matter is all of my other work is the voice that I actually have to put real work into in order to write. So that's the distinction.

[00:18:33] **Kendra** I mean, it really pairs well with the '80s nostalgia. And it's really coming out at this moment where we have a lot of '80s nostalgia appearing. But most of it seems to be focusing on men and their experiences during the '80s. Well, this is obviously very much focused on the women and the one guy on the team. What has that been like for you writing this book in this kind of—I don't know—revival of '80s stories, putting this out there when it's very much a different kind of story and a different take on the '80s than we might be seeing in some other media coming out right now?

[00:19:11] **Quan** Yeah, in general, I didn't know it when I sat down to write the book, but the '80s and witches are "really hot" right now, right?

[00:19:20] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:19:21] **Quan** And that was never my intention. My intention was just to tell a story that I felt like I knew pretty well. But I did know that when I decided to write about the 1980s that I didn't want to sugarcoat it. So even though the book is funny, there is a lot of social criticism in the book about the 1980s. Right? When you go back, and you watch a lot of those John Hughes movies, they have not aged well. You know, there's a lot of misogyny. There's a lot of homophobia. You know, just out-and-out racism in some of them. And I knew that if I was going to write about the '80s, I couldn't just sweep that under the rug and pretend that that wasn't there. And so part of the project was to rethink the '80s through the more complicated lens of 2020.

[00:20:00] **Quan** And so I'd like to say, though, that in many ways I think of the book sort of like a green smoothie. But it's the idea that, you know, you have your spinach in it. But what makes it taste good is the idea that you have like blueberries. You have an apple. Or you have honey. And again, that's what makes it palatable. And so in thinking about my book, like I said, there is a lot of social criticism in it about the 1980s. But hopefully what makes it palatable for folks is the idea that the story, I think, has . . . its generous. It has a big heart. And it's funny. And so even though you are seeing the world from the various perspectives of the different team members who are each grappling with a different aspect of being a woman, a girl coming of age, that I said that the humor helps people digest the more serious sort of social criticism that's happening.

[00:20:48] **Kendra** Yeah, and that's something that that came up again and again when I was reading more about your book was that in many ways you don't romanticize the realities of the situation, particularly for the situation for the girls of color on the team and the racism that they experienced while, you know, on the field hockey team and in that very white school. And that's something that is just so well-written in the book. But like you said, you also have very humorous moments to pair along with that. And it's just very well balanced in that way.

[00:21:23] **Quan** Yeah, thanks. Like I said, so a lot of what I do, I do do intuitively. So I didn't map out what exactly was going to be happening with all of the characters. But I just knew in general what the make up of things was going to be. And I could envision the different kinds of challenges that each girl would face. And even thinking more broadly beyond, you know, issues of race, like even just the idea of including a girl, for example, who develops early and like what that means for women who as like nine year olds but basically had the body of a woman, you know? So like I said, I just knew that I wanted to look at like many different kinds of issues that girls face as they grow up.

[00:22:06] **Kendra** I love them. They're such a great team. How did you get to know each one of the characters as you were writing this book? Because I believe each one of them has at least a chapter from their perspective. Is that right?

[00:22:19] **Quan** Yeah. You know, each of them in some way, shape, or form has . . . there's something about each of them that tracks with me, you know. So it might be really super small for some of them, but for other ones, it might be . . . it might be more. There might be. . . . I might have more in common with them. So I kind of just always knew them. And I always. . . . I think, too, that in many ways you could argue that so many of those '80s movies dealt in, you know, "archetypes" would be the nice way of putting it. "Stereotypes" would be like the not-nice way of putting it. Right? So even just for example, like, you know, the idea of, the popular girl or the jock or the brainiac or the artistic one. Right? And so in certain ways, I knew that each character was going to sort of be based on an archetype. But I knew that it would work, and it would only work if I pushed them further than what their archetype was. Right? And so it's like I knew that I had to take the archetype or the stereotype and then just complicate it, but that if I did that, then again, that they would feel real to people. And they wouldn't just feel like cardboard characters.

[00:23:27] **Kendra** And each of their voices feels so distinct because they're different personalities. And you get to see them also through the eyes of all of their teammates, which is also a way to round out who they are as characters. And by the end, you feel like you know each of them, that you've almost. . . . You make the reader feel like they're part of the team now, like they are that silent extra member, which is—I don't know—as a reader, it's just like a great feeling to have to feel that you're part of this story now, even though that's kind of the illusion of the story,

[00:23:59] **Quan** I do think because some people who are maybe a little bit more like literal readers, which isn't a bad thing, you have asked me specifically about the first person, plural voice. And you know, who is this first person, plural? Like, who exactly is telling the story? And it's true that I see it as. . . . I see it as one thing. And I don't actually like to talk about it because I feel like readers can decide for themselves. But I do think that by the end of the book, that it becomes broader. That it is like a community of people. And again, that it really broadens to me in the last page or so or the last scene.

[00:24:32] **Quan** But yeah, and thinking about just the idea of how to differentiate them. . . . Because I knew it was going to have a lot. . . . I think, like I said, a lot of what I did was instinctual. So if I had really, like, logically sat down and been like, I'm going to have each chapter be a different character instead of what. . . . I would have been like, how are you going to pull that off? How are you going to have like eleven main characters? Was just not looking up. . . . As a teacher of creative writing, if a student ever said that to me, I'd be like, "You're never going to pull that off. Don't do it." And so that's why one of the aspects that helped me as a reader—or as a writer—was that there is . . . there's a lot of—even though it's a book—I think of it as having a lot of physical comedy. And so to me, the physical comedy, part of it is even in appearance. Right? And so that's why you have different characters who have different actual physical attributes. You have the claw. You have somebody else who has this mark on their neck, which maybe is a hickey or maybe it's something else. You know, there's another character, a secondary character who has a prominent chin, you know. And so it was really important to me to do as much work as I could to help readers distinguish between these characters. And it made it easier for me too because I had to do work to really make sure that each one felt different and distinct.

[00:25:46] **Kendra** And you mention the claw and the mark on the neck that the one girl has, that they're just trying to figure out what on earth is this thing that has appeared. You have such a wonderful, fantastical side to the story where they're making this deal with this dark entity to try to win their season and all sorts of different things. Was that also naturally instinctual to include those fantastical elements in the story as you were working on this book?

[00:26:13] **Quan** So my very first novel, as I mentioned, was set in Vietnam. It's called SHE WEEPS EACH TIME YOU'RE BORN. And I worked on that book . . . depending on how you count . . . like, I worked on it for many years because I worked on a previous version of it, which was also called "She Weeps Each Time You're Born." But it was a very different book. It was a book about an actual American nurse who was in Vietnam during the war. And I worked on that book for I don't know how long. And then I realized one day that it was a disaster and that basically it should be a memoir. And there are memoirs written by American nurses who were in Vietnam. And I just realized, oh my god, I've got to scrap this book. And so I went back to Vietnam. And I was trying to get like just new ideas. And I stumbled on the fact that there are many psychics in Vietnam to help people try and discover what happened to their loved ones during wartime, and that there was a woman who, as a child, she was bitten by a rabid dog. And when she came out of her coma, allegedly, she can hear the voices of the dead. And she actually hears. . . . She helps the government then find the remains of soldiers and things like that. And when I heard that story, I was like, this is what my novel is about.

[00:27:19] **Quan** And I also realized something broader. I realized that, in general, if I have to . . . if I have any strengths as a writer—again, its a big "if"—but that hopefully one of them is I have a strength when it comes to language. And I think that's because I'm a poet, and I'm trained as a poet. And then for whatever reason, again, a possible second strength that I have, I have a very active imagination. I like to make things up. Like I took a couple of classes of improv, like I like that kind of thinking. Like, you get a problem, and you have to solve it. And I realized again with that first book that I like magical realism.

[00:27:56] **Quan** It's a long answer to your question, but I like magical realism because to me it takes something from almost like 3-D thinking, and it makes it almost like 4-D thinking. Like, you add a whole other element, right, when you add the magical that obviously can't happen. So to me, it enriches reality. Right? And so in that first book, I had a magical element. And that was the idea that it was somebody who could hear the voices of the dead. So in this book, I knew I was going to have a magical element. And it just made sense because, again, it's witchcraft, right? So there's a kind of a hive mind mentality that begins to form. In my next book, again, it's about reincarnation, which is already like a mystical . . . has mystical overtones to it. And so there is a mystical element that happens in that book. So that's not to say that all my books will be like that, but I just realized for me, it's a strength to just add one magical element, because, like I said, it allows me to do more surprising sorts of things than regular 3-D reality would allow.

[00:28:49] **Kendra** And it really fit the story so naturally, being set in Danvers, which used to be part of Salem. For me, I love . . . I'm nerdy, and I love structure and parallels. And the fact that you had this group of girls with this possible, potentially magical, actual magical thing happening in the town where the other girls way back when had a possibly magical witchy thing happening. And I really enjoyed that part of it. And learning so much more about Danvers and the area as well—as someone who's obviously I don't sports, as you may have gathered, and I'm not very familiar with New England—but it just made the story. . . . It enriched the story. And it created this almost dialogue with previous generations of teenage girls in that area. And it just. . . . It was delightful to read.

[00:29:39] **Quan** Thank you. Yeah. You know, and thinking about place. It's true that I was blessed to have a very thorough copy editor for the novel. And so usually copy editors is just stuff like, oh, you need a comma here. You need a semicolon here. Whatever. But she fact checked the book, which is kind of unusual for a novel to be fact checked. But because all of the places in the book are actual places, with the only exception to that is in the opening chapter when they're in New Hampshire. I have to admit, I do not know UNH, the University of New Hampshire that well. And so there were some made-up landmarks around UNH. And but everything else about the book is basically like 99% percent factual when it comes to place. So that was definitely something that I'm glad I was able to, again with this copy editor's help, you know, work into the book. So it's like, those are the names of the pizza places where kids hang out. Like that's the name of the bowling alley. That was the name of the stores at the mall. You know, all those kinds of fun things. And I think it does add another layer of . . . not realism in the sense like I was just talking about, like that kind of realism, like naturalistic realism. But it just makes you feel like you're really in this place and time with these people.

[00:30:45] **Kendra** Yeah, it definitely helps create that mood of place, that feeling that a place in and of itself is a character or a huge player in the story. It's. . . . I am a huge nerd for that. I really love regional literature. I'm from Appalachia. And so I love reading about other places in the United States and writers who are from there and capture the moods of where they're from. I really love that. I loved how, you know, I would go and read articles from your hometown writing about it. And the interaction between your book and the place itself also in real life has been delightful to follow as well.

[00:31:24] **Quan** Yeah, it was crazy. So when the book came out, like my mother, my mother is constantly trying to get in the newspaper because my mother is. . . . She runs like a square dance. Like my parents love square dancing. And my mother has all kinds of. . . . Danvers is town of like 25,000. And it's true that my mother is part of what's called like town representative government. So my mother is like a town representative, which sounds impressive, but there's like five hundred representatives in town. So it's not that big a deal. Right? But she's a. . . . If there's some cause though that she's like trying to get like publicity about, like either turning the old railroad tracks into like bike trails or doing something. Right? And so . . . but when my book came out, and I did. I got like all this press, like all over the north shore. My mother was just like "What?!" You know, because constantly trying to get in for her causes, like her good causes to make the town better. And yet, like, I got all this press just, like, just for this, like, book.

[00:32:20] **Kendra** It's funny how that works out. Yeah. Well, I feel like I could talk to you about this book for a very long time, but I wanted to ask you. You know, we've all been in the house for the pandemic and different things. Are there any books that you really enjoy reading during this time period that have been helpful to you? Or maybe it's just something that you read, I don't know, last week that you'd like to share with our listeners.

[00:32:43] **Quan** I rarely reread things. So whatever I'm just reading is just what I'm reading. But I rarely go back to something. So it wasn't like, the pandemic hit, and now I have to turn back to like an old book that I loved. Like, I just don't really turn back to old books that I love. But I have to say so, in the last year, I've read a ton. Some books are more helpful than others. So, for example, a helpful book that I read is a book called BREATH by James Nestor. And it just has to do with the the idea that we've kind of forgotten how important breathing and how we breathe is to health. So that was a book that I read. A book I read that I just super, super, super loved, and I was envious of—I'm like, I wish I had written this book—is a book called RED CLOCKS by Leni Zumas, which is just gorgeous book about women in the Pacific Northwest. Part of the premise is that reproductive rights have been taken away from women. But the book is not didactic. And it's about so much more than that. But it's just . . . it's just a gorgeous, gorgeous book. And then maybe the last book I just finished reading, maybe like last week, was Lydia Millet's, A CHILDREN'S BIBLE, which in some ways, it's a real downer in certain kinds of ways because it's about environmental degradation and the fact that we as a certain generation of people have really screwed over our children. But it's a great read. And so I think it was on Obama's list of best reads for 2020. So I highly recommend that one as well.

[00:34:14] **Kendra** I wanted to ask you one more because this is a very special book in that it very much embodies the '80s. What is something from maybe that we might recognize from '80s pop culture or something that you remember that you wish was still a thing today

[00:34:29] **Quan** That I wish was still. . . ? Well. . . . I couldn't actually own them. My mother would be like no. Parachute pants? I was talking to a friend of mine. And I'm like, man, as a kid, I always wanted a pair of parachute pants. And the funny thing is this friend was like, "Uh, you know, you're an adult, babe. And if you really want some, you can go out and get them." I'm like, "You know, you're right! Like, I could find a pair of parachute pants and order them online." I don't. . . . And I'm kind talking about the kind . . . because there are different kinds of parachute pants. There were some that were just like just really parachute-y and almost kind of . . . almost a little bit looked like what maybe MC Hammer might wear, just like oversized. That was one thing. But the kind that I'm talking about were also sometimes called "zipper pants." And they would have like a zillion zippers all over them. And they would be made out of the same material as like regular parachute pants. So now that I'm talking to you, I'm like, maybe I will go online and see what I could track down for a pair of zip pants. As a kid, you know, my mother. . . . My mother sews. And so it's true that a lot of my clothes—which last forever, and I still actually have a couple of the things that she made, although they don't fit as well as they used to—but so a lot of my clothes was handmade, which in the '80s, even though these clothes were beautiful, it wasn't . . . it definitely wasn't stylish to have your mom make your clothes in the 1980s, you know what I mean. Although some things were. Like my mother actually made me that purple tuxedo that shows up in the novel. And so that was actually again just ripped right from the headlines of my life. But yes, parachute pants are the short answer for things that I wish people were still wearing.

[00:36:00] **Kendra** I also had a mother who made my clothes. And she loved to make us matching outfits a lot in the wild patterns of the '90s. And we had a lot of matching jumpers. And we had an old-fashion day. So she made us like Laura Ingalls Wilder, basically, outfits with bonnets. And she had a hoop skirt and like all the stuff. And yeah, those photos are buried for sure.

[00:36:25] **Quan** There's a picture of me and my mom and one of my sisters in a matching outfit that my mom made for the three of us. So, yes.

[00:36:32] **Kendra** Always an adventure. Well, thank you so much for coming on the show and talking with me about your book. It's been delightful.

[00:36:40] **Quan** Fabulous. Thanks for having me.

[00:36:45] **Kendra** And that's our show. I'd like to thank Quan Barry for talking with me about her novel, WE RIDE UPON STICKS, which is out now in paperback from Vintage. 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.