

## Interview with Raven Leilani

[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 Raven Leilani, the author of *LUSTER*, which is out now from Farrar, Straus and Giroux. For a full transcript of our conversation, check out the episode show notes over on [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com). This is the last interview in a series of episodes that we are doing in partnership with the Miami Book Fair, which is all online this year. You can go find out more information about the Miami Book Fair on [miamibookfaironline.com](http://miamibookfaironline.com) to see all of their events, to log in, register, and participate. There is still time.

[00:00:54] **Kendra** So in this series of episodes so far, I've talked to K-Ming Chang about her novel, *BESTIARY*. I've talked to Naima Coster about her debut novel, *HALSEY STREET*. And now I'm talking to Raven Leilani about her novel, *LUSTER*. So this novel is about a young Black woman named Edie who is working in a publishing house. And she's just really scraping by. And she starts an affair with a married white man. So through a series of events, she ends up living with the white guy and his wife and their daughter, who is adopted and she is Black. And so that creates a very interesting dynamic in the house as she lives there. And this book is so well written, and the prose is absolutely gorgeous. Not a word out of place. I was just so impressed that this was her debut. Like, it's a phenomenal book. And it's not that long either. But I felt like she packed so much into the story that when I finished, I felt I had read twice as many pages. I really enjoyed the audiobook as well. Would highly recommend. And I really loved being able to talk to Raven about her book.

[00:02:08] **Kendra** So a little bit about Raven Leilani before we get started. Like I mentioned, *LUSTER* is her first novel. And it recently came out from FSG. Her work has been published in *Granta*, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *Yale Review*, *Conjunctions*, *The Cut*, and *New England Review*, among other publications. And she completed her MFA at NYU. And you can reach her on Twitter (@ravenleilani). And if you are also—I want to note before we get started—if you are in the UK, her book is coming out January 21st of 2021. So hang in there. The book is coming soon to you. All right. Without further ado, here's my conversation with Raven Leilani.

[00:03:01] **Kendra** Thank you so much for coming on the podcast, Raven. I am so thrilled to talk to you about your book, *LUSTER*.

[00:03:08] **Raven** Thank you for having me. This is very cool.

[00:03:12] **Kendra** Well, I loved your book. But before we jump into that conversation, what has been bringing you joy recently? And things have been so much this year, but what are some things that have been really like a light in your life for you?

[00:03:26] **Raven** Oh, boy. I've just been like revisiting my favorite paintings. I had . . . you know, the Met reopened recently. I was able to kind of go. And it was, you know, it was a very different experience because it's very, you know, a lot of social distancing rules are enforced, as they should be. And so the museum itself was empty. I'd never experienced that. But I was able to revisit some of my paintings and also find new ones that I really loved. Like, right now, I'm really into the paintings of Mary Cassatt. Those are bringing me so much joy, honestly, giving me fuel for when I feel like I want to try my hand at painting.

[00:04:09] **Kendra** And you're a painter as well.

[00:04:11] **Raven** Yes. You know, it's weird. It's weird. I feel weird to to claim that because it's been sort of a secret, private thing I did alongside my writing. But it definitely is something I'm doing a lot of. When the pandemic started. . . . I don't know . . . something . . . that side of my brain turned on. And I honestly was able to paint more than I have been able to write. So I've definitely been feeding myself with more painters that I really love. Yeah.

[00:04:40] **Kendra** Well, I went on your website. And there are some examples of your work there. And it's just beautiful.

[00:04:46] **Raven** Thank you.

[00:04:47] **Kendra** I am a huge fan. It was very helpful for in the book—we'll get into that in a little bit—because your protagonist is an artist as well. But you had a lot going on recently with this book. Immediately, it was a bestseller. It was talked about on every single Bookstagram page and across the internet. And most recently, it was. . . . You've been named a 5 Under 35 honoree by the National Book Award. So huge congrats there.

[00:05:17] **Raven** Thank you so much. It's been. . . . I mean, that . . . it's really deeply surreal still. I feel like even without this, this year, everything that has happened would feel unreal. But it has just been. . . . I feel extreme relief, but also gratitude that people are engaging with the book, you know, in this way. That's what you hope for. At least that's what I hoped for when I was writing this book. You know, when I was in the middle of this draft, it was different in that unlike a lot of the other things I written before it, I really wrote it with the intention that it would be read. And I wanted it to be inviting and welcoming. And so I'm so glad that. . . . I'm really, really glad that people have come to it with generosity and also reading with a critical eye. I've learned a lot in these last couple of months talking about people with the book.

[00:06:13] **Kendra** Well, this is your debut novel. And I always love to hear kind of your publishing story. So how long were you working on this book? And how long did it take for it to be published with FSG?

[00:06:24] **Raven** I started this book my second year in my MFA. I went to the NYU MFA program. I had been living in DC about five years before I came back to New York. And I'd been kind of chipping away and writing short stories and trying to get those published in literary journals that I really loved. And so what that means is that I was pretty much for five years kind of like getting published here and there, but mostly collecting rejections. And the book that I came to New York with was actually not this book. It was a totally different thing that I was really excited about. But after my first workshop, I had these really illuminating and somewhat crushing conversations with people who would become my mentors, who asked me necessary questions about why I was writing the thing I was writing and whether I felt it belonged in the world. And when I couldn't really answer those questions with any real conviction, I started this book in my second year. So I wrote it.

[00:07:30] **Raven** And pretty much it took a little bit over a year to write this book. I started it my second year and pretty much finished it as I was graduating the program. It was funny because I feel like I had been kind of hardened by that first part of my journey where I was really just trying to break through and get some traction with my short stories and my poetry. And I had learned that the process was very much about kind of persevering. You know, you collect the rejections. And then you kind of see what works, and you see what

sticks. And so at that point, you know, when I was working on this book—and it felt different to me; it felt urgent—I got an agent. I think I was like three chapters into the book. And I was in Katie Kitamura's workshop. And I think that, you know, she saw that I was really serious about this project, and I needed guidance desperately. And so she. . . . You know, I really do want to give credit to the fact that so much of my journey, when it started really going well, it was because there were people who had been through it who saw me and saw my seriousness and really took me up on that. And then I think a year after that, it was published. So from Google doc, you know, to finished draft, it was about a year and then another year before it came out. And that is actually quite a short.

[00:08:57] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:08:57] **Raven** A short time, from what I understand. But I think when it was acquired, we wanted to get it out as soon as possible.

[00:09:04] **Kendra** That, I mean, that is an incredibly short amount of time. I think, especially since, you know, your protagonist, Edie, has a very strong voice in the novel, in just the whole. . . . I'm just enraptured by her. And the last time I was this kind of obsessed with a protagonist was in Patty Yumi Cottrell's *SORRY TO DISRUPT THE PEACE*.

[00:09:30] **Raven** Yes.

[00:09:31] **Kendra** Someone read. . . . Joce, one of our contributors read this and was like, Kendra! (We're both huge fans of that book.) And she's like, you need to read this. This is . . . this is like . . . this gives me that . . . kind of like goosebumps . . . kind of story.

[00:09:44] **Raven** Wow.

[00:09:45] **Kendra** So when I read it, I was like, yes. And I read it in twenty-four hours. I just flew through it.

[00:09:50] **Raven** Wow! I love hearing that. I love hearing that. Thank you.

[00:09:56] **Kendra** I'll try not to fangirl too much. But how did her voice first appear in your mind? Was it something that you had to develop over time? Or did she just kind of appear in your mind fully formed?

[00:10:09] **Raven** I would say that nothing ever really appeared in my mind fully formed. You know, like I really. . . . I start a thing. I have something that feels exciting to me. And I get to the page. And it's that moment where, you know, the rubber meets the road where you figure out if it's going to work or not. And for pretty much everything I write, I'm actually pretty deep in it and still wondering if it's going to work. And so, you know, when I started this, I think what made it work is that I did really feel that this project was urgent. You know, even during the moments where I felt kind of adrift and not sure how to proceed, Edie came to me. Edie came to me partly because I think, at the time I. . . . You know, she's an aspiring artist. And she's trying to meet the demands of living while trying to carve out space to make art. And that was very much what I was going through at the time because I was in my MFA. I was working full time and working on this book. And so I was. . . . I was really kind of in a deeply frantic state. You know, everything felt urgent, everything felt important. And I felt all the time that there wasn't enough time. And I think that came out onto the page organically.

[00:11:33] **Raven** Where I started writing this young Black woman who is trying to make art but is also contending with the real impediments in the way that kind of preclude her ability to have the means or faith or time to make art. She is . . . she's trying to eat. She's trying to pay her student debt. And she's also trying to sustain belief in herself, even though the work is private, and the work is done in these dark kind of after hours. So I think for me, the voice came from that, from the scramble that I was in trying to make art myself, but also a feeling I had that I really desperately needed to see a Black woman on the page who is messing up, who is failing, who is human, and who deeply wants to be touched and to be witnessed.

[00:12:33] **Kendra** I really appreciate you saying that because I feel like oftentimes I'll see reviews, and it's like they expect so much of perfection from their Black women characters. And that's obviously very problematic. I mean, Edie deserves just as much space to screw up and make mistakes as anyone else. And I really appreciated the way that you wrote that in the story.

[00:12:58] **Raven** Thank you. That was, I mean, that was really important to me. I mean, and almost exactly the point where I feel, you know, Black women especially are tasked with surviving in environments where they are . . . where it is actually risky to be fallible. And so, you know, I was trying to write against the idea of of stoicism as virtuous, of bearing pain well as virtuous. Like I wanted. . . . Because I think ultimately that expectation that Black women be pristine and that they comport themselves in X way to be afforded empathy that that is dehumanizing. And so it was, you know, it is also just fun to write a chaotic character, but it also felt—in a way that it shouldn't be—it felt radical to write a deeply fallible Black woman who is making dysfunctional choices that are sometimes her own, but are also responses to an extremely dysfunctional environment.

[00:14:06] **Kendra** And I think you definitely got into her head. And so that you might be like screaming at the book, like, why are you making this choice? But at the same time, you're like, oh, I see how she got there.

[00:14:16] **Raven** Yes, yes.

[00:14:17] **Kendra** That type of characterization on so many levels is just throughout the entire book. And I think for a book of this size and of this intensely focused on character, I mean, that has to be there. But I think you were very successful at that.

[00:14:29] **Raven** Thank you. I really appreciate that.

[00:14:32] **Kendra** The characters in this book are my favorite part because each of them—even characters that aren't there very long, like some of the men that she has slept with or her coworkers—you see them on the page in such a vibrant, well-rounded way, even if they're just there to kind of make a point or move her along on her journey. End up in this relationship with this married man, and Edie ends up living with them. And the wife knows that she and her husband are having this relationship. It's very . . . you're just reading the book, and you're like, how did you get here? But you kind of make all those steps. When it came to the other characters in the book, the people in Edie's life, I guess how did you go about making those other characters? And did they originate from something you wanted Edie to experience? Or were they kind of separate, and you were like, oh, I really like this character. I want to expand on that. I guess, what is your process for that?

[00:15:26] **Raven** I think it's very much the latter where I like this character, and I want to see where I can go with it because I do think when I'm writing, it is the most like . . . my Bible is, in terms of character, is subvert that expectation, subvert the expectation of what this character would look like archetypically. Because I think that the honest depictions contain contradiction that are inherent to being human. They allow characters to be surprising in the way that I feel like people are surprising. And so when it came to depicting some of them—even just the secondary characters, not even just like the main crew—I wanted them to inhabit that space in a way that felt full and in a way that would hopefully provide for the reader what is really yummy to me when I'm reading, which is recognition, as in, "I've seen that person before. I know that person." For me with character, I really try . . . try and get as granular as I can because I do think the more detailed, the more recognition is possible. And that's what I'm looking for and writing toward, which is, you know, I want people to come to the book and and have that, "Oh, I know that." Or, you know, I mean, the flip side is, "Oh, I didn't know that," which is also great. But with the main crew, Rebecca the wife and Eric—who she starts this relationship with—and Akila, their adopted daughter. I really like . . . there's a lot of me in all of them, I would say. So there's that to, where some of it was me writing what I knew, but also me wanting to allow these characters to exist on the page in a way that felt generous and human. And that wasn't, in an overt way, trying to guide my reader to the idea of who this person is and what they represent.

[00:17:28] **Kendra** And I really appreciated that about your characters because there's a lot that you cover in this book. And again, I read it, and I feel like my experience was with a book twice as long as it is. I feel like you definitely packed a lot into this story. And one of those things is these power dynamics between Edie and the family that she's staying with, with her coworkers, with her experience, you know, with class. And all of these things are tied up together in her experience with this family. What were some of the challenges that you experienced working with all these different power dynamics as you were writing the story?

[00:18:10] **Raven** Oh, man. I mean, that really was like one of the top five challenges of putting this book together. I do remember, like when I started getting towards the middle and all the characters were in play, I panicked a little bit because I was like, how do I balance all of these personalities? How do I, you know, how do I make it so that their interactions feel specific? And I think that's sort of almost the answer too, which is that how I did that was I tried to make it so that the way, you know, each character interacted with other characters felt natural to the character that had been established. You know, like I do think balancing the power dynamics between these four characters really comes from being faithful to how I set them up on the page. So Rebecca is, I think, ultimately the person in this book who is most in control. She's a character who is in control. She's precise, and she's serious. She's also surprising. And Edie is very much out of control. You know, she is chaotic, and she's led around by her id. And so drawing two characters like that together is really fun on the page and is really exciting because you get to experience the sort of friction between poles. And you get with Eric and Edie . . . that, too, is exciting because Edie is a character who is excited by the power imbalance and who absolutely leans in to the sort of annihilation that that offers her. And so that was one way I handled that. And with Akela, that was actually . . . that was different terrain for me in writing Edie because Edie throughout the book is sort of looking for care and looking for witnesses, but in this situation—you know, in this dynamic—she becomes more of the caretaker. It really was. . . . It's funny because I feel I've never actually articulated exactly how. But like, once the character was on the page, along with the others, you know, there . . . it just kind of fell into place. In a way, it kind of just fell into place. You know, I got to play

around with the way that power, I think, naturally oscillates between people as they begin to reveal themselves to each other.

[00:20:37] **Kendra** And these moments between them that are just so intimate and that reflect these power dynamics and how they're kind of moving . . . and there's also these other moments like between Akela and Edie—like when they're playing video games. And I love video games. And so these moments. . . .

[00:20:59] **Raven** Yes!

[00:21:01] **Kendra** I would be like, okay, this is this game that she's talking about. This one is this game.

[00:21:06] **Raven** Amazing! Can I put you on the spot and ask you what your favorite is?

[00:21:11] **Kendra** My favorite video game?

[00:21:13] **Raven** Yes.

[00:21:14] **Kendra** I would say "Zelda: Ocarina of Time."

[00:21:19] **Raven** Okay, very nice.

[00:21:23] **Kendra** I also love simulation games. So things like "Animal Crossing," "The Sims." I played "World of Warcraft" on and off for years.

[00:21:36] **Raven** Yes!

[00:21:36] **Kendra** So I listen to audiobooks and play video games at the same time. It's like this beautiful. . . .

[00:21:41] **Raven** Oh, I love that!

[00:21:42] **Kendra** Yeah, you should definitely try it sometime.

[00:21:44] **Raven** Yes! I don't know why I have never. . . . Like, that is actually perfect. I mean, it's really . . . it's wonderful to talk . . . to hear your love of games, you know. And it really is, like you're right, it is in the text. You know, I—like you—you know, role-playing games are where my heart is. You know, there is that sort of a little bit on the page where Edie is very much more into like your "Call of Duty," kind of first-person shooters. And Akela has her own kind of philosophy around the merit of a game where you actually have to speak to villagers, you know.

[00:22:23] **Raven** And so totally in that part of the book, that's just my love coming through because I, too, you know, really, really love and kind of came up in, like, the narrative worlds of video games. And, you know, when Edie and Akela are drawing nearer to each other, they are doing it through this medium. They're doing it through these avatars. And I can say personally, that has been, you know, in my early adulthood, that was one major way that I bonded with people, through a shared fandom. And I wanted to not only just kind of be able to make room for, you know, to spew my own fandom, but also to show two Black women engaged in a joyful experience, you know, one that is in a way that is perhaps, you know, you could read it in a way where these two Black women are relating

to each other and still a digital context where they, you know, are still kind of disembodied in the way that a lot of Black women have to be as they move through the world. But it also was a site of enormous joy for me to be able to (1) kind of pay homage to the video games that have shaped my sensibilities and that have brought me joy, but also (2) to show two Black women enjoying themselves and enjoying themselves in a communal way.

[00:24:01] **Kendra** One of the things I loved about that section is that by you mentioning what video games each one likes in their philosophy, that revealed also a lot about their character if you are already familiar with the games.

[00:24:12] **Raven** Yes.

[00:24:13] **Kendra** It's sort of like when an author is really into music. And I know nothing about music history. And I know if I actually knew what these things were, I would get a lot more out of the book. And I felt like your book was very similar, but in a video game kind of way. So.

[00:24:30] **Raven** Thank you for saying that. And I really am so glad that it could be that because that, too, is like the recognition that we were talking about earlier, where isn't it so delicious to read a thing or to watch a thing and to have something in there that is just for you to recognize. And I really, you know, I enjoy that when I encounter it. So it was kind of a pleasure to be able to plant those things.

[00:24:55] **Kendra** I wanted to ask you a little bit about the title because I know that relates to painting and luster in painting, but also has the word "lust" in it. And also, I wanted to fangirl about Na Kim a little bit because. . . .

[00:25:11] **Raven** Yes! She is a genius. She is incredible.

[00:25:17] **Kendra** Yeah, I love her covers so, so much. And then when I'll pick out a cover like your cover, and I'm like, I want to frame this and put it on my wall.

[00:25:28] **Raven** Right?

[00:25:28] **Kendra** It's usually one of three people. And Na Kim is high up there. And she's so talented, like. . . .

[00:25:34] **Raven** She really, really is. Like it was like the first cover they sent me. So it was. . . . Because I had been told that that process is like kind of a long and perhaps arduous one. And so I was braced, but they sent me the very first one. And it was this. It was literally. . . . It was art. Beautiful. Like just . . . I'm actually looking at it right now. I have it right beside me. And it is just. . . . It's so . . . like the colors are so bright and so vital. And it really, I feel like it encapsulates everything that the book is. You know, I said to her that it is just incredibly cool to write a book about art and have actual art wrapped around it. You know, it is. . . . She is really . . . she distilled the book into like the perfect, I don't know, the perfect visual. It's weird because I'm accustomed to being able to just hold it up when I'm talking about it. But we can't do that here. But it is. . . . The fact of it having like the hair on the cover, the textured hair, which means a lot to me as a Black woman and having that luster of skin and having her sort of, kind of, out of frame a little bit. . . . Where if you stand back from the book, it's kind of . . . it looks more abstract. Like, it is a beautiful kind of shape-shifting cover. It's really, really. . . . I'm so glad you brought her up because she is really just . . . she's amazing.

[00:27:07] **Kendra** Was "LUSTER" always the title of this book?

[00:27:11] **Raven** It really wasn't. And I laugh because that is one thing that would come up in workshop, that came up in revisions. Like, everybody was like, you have to do something about that terrible title. And so the title that, you know, I had for this book was not good. And then after I sent like fifty or sixty different titles to my editor, Jenna, when we got to "LUSTER," we knew that that was it. And like you mentioned, I think pretty much you summed it up. Like, the reason we named it LUSTER is because of that, you know, that almost punny wordplay of lust and paint, luster. But also the idea of . . . I mean, the idea of fantasy coming up against the flesh, you know? The idea of that luster. Or fantasy of, you know, not necessarily of a person, but of a grind, of what you think the journey should look like and what it actually looks like and the way that that . . . you know . . . how to either maintain or preserve that luster or the way that it is tarnished. And that sounds . . . I think that sounds heavy. But I do think that that is. . . . I wanted to still, with the title, be talking practically about what it means to maintain your faith and your drive in the midst of all of the kind of natural impediments that there are to making art, to carving yourself, to carving time out to do work that's meaningful for you.

[00:28:48] **Kendra** So, well, those are all the questions that I had for you about the book. Is there anything else that you wanted to talk about that we haven't covered before we jump into the closer questions?

[00:28:58] **Raven** Well, I just want to say thank you so much for having me on. And I did want to say that this is cool that this is a part of the Miami Book Fair. You know, I have a few panels that I'm on. It's kind of my first time around with this whole thing. So it's really nice to be here, but also to be doing this in conjunction with the book fair.

[00:29:23] **Kendra** And I will be sure to include links to that in the show notes so listeners can go find that. But the last question I have for you is what books have you been reading recently that have really just been bringing you joy? Or something that you've really enjoyed? Or anything that you would want to recommend to our listeners?

[00:29:42] **Raven** I really, really love THESE GHOSTS ARE FAMILY by Maisy Card. I love LAKEWOOD by Megan Giddings, BESTIARY by K-Ming Chang. I have returned to Rachel Kusk because I really like that outline series. I think that's what the trilogy. I feel that those books really absorb me. And I have just started a book that actually . . . it didn't just come out. It came out a while ago, I think . . . BUNNY by Mona Awad. I really, really am digging that.

[00:30:14] **Kendra** Well, I will link those as well in the show notes, so people can go check them out. I also enjoy Maisy Card. We talked about her work for Caribbean Heritage Month back in June. And she is a gift, and I can't wait to see what she's doing next.

[00:30:31] **Raven** Yes!

[00:30:32] **Kendra** That's it. But thank you again for coming on the podcast. It's been really great.

[00:30:37] **Raven** Thank you.

[00:30:39] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Raven Leilani for talking with me about her debut novel, LUSTER, which is out now from Farrar, Straus and Giroux. You can find her on Twitter (@ravenleilani) and of course, on her website, ravenleilani.weebly.com. And of course, all of this information will be linked in the show notes. I'd also like to thank the Miami Book Fair for partnering with us on this series of episodes. It's been great to work with them, so be sure to go check them out at miamibookfaironline.com. You can find Reading Women at readingwomenpodcast.com and on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). You can find me (@kdwinchester). And thanks so much for listening.