

Interview with Vicki Laveau-Harvie

[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 Vicki Laveau-Harvie, the author of *THE ERRATICS*, which is out now from Knopf. For a full transcript of this episode, check out the show notes on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And make sure you're subscribed so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:36] **Kendra** So today, I am so thrilled to be able to talk to Vicki Laveau-Harvie, who won the Stella Prize in 2019 for her memoir. Now this book is about her taking care of her elderly parents several years ago when her mother fell and broke her hip. Her parents were in their early 90s at the time, I believe. And so she flies back to Canada, where she's from, and she meets her sister there. And then they go over to her parents property, and they are isolated there. And they discover—when they go see their father at the house—that her mom has been very manipulative, which we learn has been a theme of Vicki's childhood. And she was actually slowly starving Vicki's father. And so just a content warning that there is some elder abuse in the story and some emotional and verbal abuse there.

[00:01:38] **Kendra** And so in this very . . . just quietly brilliant memoir, Vicki describes her life. And there's a lot of universal themes of family and caring for elderly parents. There's also discussion of mental illness and how her mom has a personality disorder and what that was like growing up in that household. And Vicki does end up in Australia, which is the other side of the world. With the six years that the book spans, you learn more and more about this experience of caring for her parents. And I absolutely loved listening to the Australian audiobook edition of this book, which Vicki reads. I believe the American one is narrated by someone else. But whatever format you experience this book in, I think you'll really enjoy it. Vicki and I had a great time discussing everything under the sun. And I felt like we could have continued talking for hours. So this is a little bit of a longer interview, but it is incredibly beautiful. And I had the most amazing time recording it. And so I hope that you enjoy listening to it as much as I enjoyed our conversation.

[00:02:55] **Kendra** So before we jump into that, a little bit about Vicki so that you can learn more about her. She was born in Canada, but she lived for many years in France before settling in to Australia. And she has three passports and treasures the unique perspective of this quirk of fate affords her. In France, she worked as a translator and as a business editor despite being a specialist in 18th century French literature. In Sydney, she lectured in French studies. And after retiring, she taught ethics in a primary school. She is passionate about writing, education, and communication. And her memoir, *THE ERRATICS*, which we're talking about today, won the 2018 Finch Memoir Prize and the 2019 Stella Prize. It was shortlisted for the 2019 Douglas Stuart Prize for Nonfiction. And she has won prizes for short fiction and poetry. So she is very accomplished. And this is her first book, which she published, I believe, in her 70s. So this is an incredible story around her life. And I hope that you enjoy this insight into her life and her experience as much as I did.

[00:04:14] **Kendra** Well, welcome, Vicki, to the podcast. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:04:18] **Vicki** I'm delighted to be here, Kendra. Thank you so much.

[00:04:22] **Kendra** Well, how are you holding up down there in Australia with everything that's been going on in 2020?

[00:04:28] **Vicki** Well, I think like everyone, we are finding it all very confronting, but we have the great good fortune to have very low numbers. Aside from one area south of where I live, in the state of Victoria, where there have been more cases, but they're getting on top of it. That was our second wave. But we've been very, very fortunate. We've had strict curbs on what we've been able to do. But I believe that that and being an island helps because you can close your borders very effectively when you need to. And I mean, it's not ideal, but we're in a much better position than we might have been, and we're very thankful for that.

[00:05:11] **Kendra** We here in America are a dumpster fire, per usual. So I feel like that's not a surprise to anyone who watches the news about America at this point. But there has been some silver linings, I think, this year, in that there have been an amazing group of books that has been coming out, including your book, *THE ERRATICS*. And your book came out, and it won, I believe, the 2018 Finch Prize for Memoir and then the 2019 Stella Prize, which we followed very . . . well, we follow it every year very closely.

[00:05:47] **Vicki** Yes.

[00:05:48] **Kendra** So since the book has come out, and it has won these awards, how has that changed your career? Your writing career and your life? What has that change been like?

[00:05:58] **Vicki** Well, it's been huge, needless to say, because I'm kind of a crypto writer. I got a lot of surprise from people who didn't actually know me when my book won those prizes. And they would often say to my daughter—not to me, not to my face—they would say something like, how amazing that your mother just out of the blue wrote this book. Now, it wasn't quite just out of the blue. I've always written. And I wrote professionally. I was a translator, a report editor. I studied for a very long time at university before I did those things. And I was an academic also. So that means that I've always been writing.

[00:06:43] **Vicki** And from my forties, I was doing what people seem to want to call creative writing, although I believe—I've said this a number of times—I think that any writing is creative. And I began writing short stories in my forties and became interested in memoir after I moved down here to Australia. And I have always wanted to write something about my family of origin, which was not an average family—if there is any such animal. I don't actually believe there is an average family. I think all families are a little bit problematic in some ways. But having recognition for something that I had written was unusual for me because I'm very bad at sending anything anywhere. I don't submit stuff. I love to write, and the actual mechanics of submitting things to different places has always kind of escaped me. And it was a bit of a fluke that this manuscript got submitted to anything. And now here I am, speaking to wonderful people in far flung places and having the great joy of having readers contact me and tell me that something in what I've written has resonated for them, which is just a joy I would not have expected to experience. It's been wonderful.

[00:08:18] **Vicki** As far as a career as a writer, I have not been a writer as a career. I would say I was an academic until I retired. Writing was just something for me. It was how I got in touch with myself. And I think that's part of what *THE ERRATICS* is also about, the

difficulties of being in touch with yourself and who you really are when you've come from a background that projected an image of you that had nothing to do with who you were.

[00:08:54] **Kendra** You mentioned that it was sort of a fluke how this manuscript kind of found its place with your first publisher. How did that happen and what was it like? And I believe your first publisher sold out or went under. And then it went to another publisher. What is that story?

[00:09:12] **Vicki** Well, they did, six months after my book was published. This was a small, independent publisher called Finch Publishing. And every year, they had a memoir prize, which had—as part of the prize—there was an amount of money and there was also the very good part, which was publication of the winner of the memoir competition. It was a manuscript competition. And I had finished this manuscript of *THE ERRATICS* about two years before. And I have quite terrible insomnia. And one night, I had just given up. And I got up, and I was reading my emails. There was an email from a wonderful place outside of Sydney here in Australia, which is called Varuna. It's called The Writer's House. It's in the Blue Mountains about an hour and a half drive from Sydney inland. It's a beautiful old house that belonged to an Australian novelist called Eleanor Dark and her husband in a mountain village called Katoomba. And they've turned it into a writer's center. It was left to be for that purpose. There are five bedrooms, so they have weeks where five writers can be there. There are no telephones, no TV, no radio, no noise, no nothing. You're just confronted with whatever it is you need to write. And it is confronting. It's very difficult. People go swimming, and they go for walks, and, you know, anything to avoid this absolute confrontation with what you should be doing with your time.

[00:10:46] **Vicki** And I saw this newsletter come by from this wonderful place, Varuna. And there was a thing called a Memoir Week. And I thought, I've got this manuscript in the drawer. It's kind of bothering me that it's just sitting there because I'd like to get an opinion on it. So I applied for a place. And there were only five places. I did not expect to get one. But I thought, "Okay, I will get off my own back about this if I apply for a place. I won't get one. But that's fine. I've done something." I did get a place.

[00:11:19] **Vicki** I met a wonderful writer called Carol Major, who is a consultant with that writer's house. And she said to me, "You must do something with this manuscript." And I was very surprised and delighted, of course, that she got what I'd written so thoroughly. And I don't know anything about doing these things. So I knew there was a memoir prize. So I said, "Okay, I will submit this to the memoir prize." And I remember saying to a friend of mine on the phone, after I'd gone to the post office with my manuscript—because you had to send the physical manuscript to this competition. And I went and mailed it. And I remember phoning a friend and saying, "I just won." And she said, "What did you win?" And I said, "I just won because I went and put something in the mail." That's how that happened—because I respected this person who was my consultant up there at this writer's house. And I thought, "I can't just disregard what she's told me." And she did say things to me that made me think that something I had written had been meaningful to her and that it was worth me trying to give it an audience if I could. And then what happened happened.

[00:12:33] **Kendra** Wow. And then did they, the original publisher, submit it to the Stella? Or was it your second publisher that submitted it to the Stella?

[00:12:41] **Vicki** Well, yes. Your publisher submits. And that was . . . the first publisher was still my publisher when the Stella submissions were going in. So it was submitted to the

Stella. And then that publisher unfortunately closed because it's always unfortunate when a small, independent publisher closes. I was lucky enough, being longlisted for the Stella first of all, to find another publisher, a much bigger publisher the second time, and one with whom I've had a great relationship and an agent who has negotiated various difficulties for me because I'm an absolute newbie at all of this. I had no idea how to go about anything.

[00:13:27] **Vicki** And then I won the Stella, which was one of the huge joys of my life. Because if you wanted to win just one prize in your life, if you're in Australia and you're a woman writing, you want the Stella because it is the prize for women's writing in the previous year. And it's an absolute—the Stella Foundation is a wonderful thing, as I believe you well know. And they do things in schools. They started out doing actually statistical things, looking at the frequency of publishing of women's work, the reviews that were of women's work as compared to men's writing, and the number of reviewers who were women. And they started doing that almost two decades ago.

[00:14:17] **Vicki** But they then at one point, which was seven years ago, eight years now, decided to fund a writing prize. That is the one that I won. I was the seventh winner and the second memoir. There has been fiction and historical works and various other things in the mix this year. It was a journalist who wrote on the subject of domestic abuse. And there have been novels. There have been other things, and two of us have been memoir writers. So the Stella is an absolutely marvelous thing. And it opened the door to doing quite a lot of talking to various people about writing and about the possibilities for writing and the rewards of writing. It's been wonderful. So you are the Stella ambassador for a year, basically. And I did that for a year. Now it's on someone else's shoulders.

[00:15:13] **Kendra** Yeah. I believe it's Jess Hill that won.

[00:15:15] **Vicki** It is Jess Hill, yes. It was a quite remarkable book.

[00:15:19] **Kendra** Yeah, Jaclyn is doing a live show with her this weekend, as of this recording. And she actually rewrote much of her book for the US edition. And so anyway, I won't spoil anything for anyone who wants to go back and watch that. And I'll make sure to link that in the show notes. But that's really fascinating when a book comes to a new country from the original country of origin. And so what has it been like for you, having your book come to the US?

[00:15:47] **Vicki** Well, actually, since in my case, my book going to the States, it was mostly since . . . to some extent, the cake was baked. You know. This was a book that was finished. And it was memoir. So the modifications were very minor. I mean, it was often, you know, kilometers to miles and a couple of expressions that made no sense in America, things like that, because the arc of the thing was not going to change in any way. So. . . . But it was amazing to think that a different . . . perhaps a different style of readership . . . because I'm not really sure . . . because I don't know what kind of reception the book may have in the US . . . that people may read a bit differently in the US to how they read down here. It's fascinating for me because I really don't know. I'm hoping that the underlying universality of the themes will interest people. And I think the themes of family and mental health issues in families, sibling differences in families, various things of that nature are universal enough that it carries the story.

[00:17:12] **Kendra** I recently read an anthology called WHAT MY MOTHER AND I DON'T TALK ABOUT, and it's an anthology of several different writers talking about their relationships with their mothers and things that are left unsaid. And so I read that book

very closely to yours. And your book is about. . . . It starts with the crisis that happens, where your mom falls and breaks her hip. And you go back to Canada, and you meet your sister there. And you go, and you kind of deal with that crisis situation. The themes really resonated with me because, you know, most people have a complex relationship with their parents. And what that looks like is always very different. But yours in particular, I feel like is a very unique story. But at the same time, there are so many people, I feel like, who will definitely be able to relate to that. One of the things you've talked about is caring for your aging parents and how that society doesn't really make room for older people. Could you expand on that idea and share your experience as you were caring for your parents in that situation?

[00:18:24] **Vicki** Well, I found that when I got there with my sister, I mean, we found my father in quite difficult condition because he hadn't been eating. And they'd been very, very isolated. And my mother was not really evolving in the real world. You know, she was not connected to things in a practical way or. . . . She was really somewhere else. I mean, she had always been like this, but with age and isolation. . . . We all know isolation makes things worse. I mean, we're all acquainted with that now. But I found that there were people who were very willing to help. And part of my sister and my difficulties arose from the fact that the health services in particular had a model that they looked at older people who needed help through. They had kind of a way of looking at things, and it must be that way. I understand that it has to be that way. But that meant that we were being cast in a kind of a role which wasn't ours, you know. And on the one hand, I applauded this because people in the hospital system in particular—and there were some wonderful people who were really trying very hard to find the best solutions for my mother, and eventually that solution was found—they tended to believe her. Now with my mother, this is a very bad thing because my mother did fabulate an awful lot. And she was very charismatic and very convincing.

[00:20:13] **Vicki** And I've told the story a number of times of going to meet the neighbors when I was staying at my father's, and I thought I will go down the road to meet the neighbors and introduce myself. And this is in the country. So I went down to the neighbor's place, and I could see they should be home because there were vehicles and horses and, you know, it was the middle of the day. And I knocked on the door, and no one answered. And my uncle had driven me down there. And I got back in the car with my uncle having knocked for quite some time and said to him, "There is nobody in there." And he said to me, "Oh, they're in there because the curtains are moving. They're just not opening the door." And I realized that my mother had told a number of people, including people in the hospital, that she had lost track of me in particular decades ago when I had gone to Columbia and disappeared, and that either she had INTERPOL looking for me or that INTERPOL was looking for me. I don't think you could just, you know, dial an INTERPOL. But I'm not sure exactly. I can't remember exactly what the story was. But it was one of those two things. And she had people convinced that I was the drug queen of Colombia basically.

[00:21:35] **Kendra** Oh my stars.

[00:21:36] **Vicki** And anyone who has met me knows that's highly unlikely. I'm one of the few who went through the '60s without doing anything except over-the-counter painkillers. And I think that that just never crossed my mind, you know? But I was confronted with my sister with a system that believed my mother and was sensitive to elder abuse. And I applaud that. I mean, I was applauding them all the time they were making our lives very difficult because this is how it has to be. You need to defend people. There needs to be a

place for them. And I think it's become even more obvious now. I'm not sure in the US . . . but in Australia, in Britain, in a number of places in Europe that we don't value older people the way we should, that there isn't a connection with the rest of society that should be maintained for the good of everyone because the experience that older people have is valuable and is valued in some civilizations. And I don't feel that in the West we're doing this very well. And it's led to some very dire consequences in our present situation. So we were up against that. And also, I'm not a young person. I'm an older person. And I am looking at these issues of ageism and relevance and things of this nature myself. You know, having looked at them for my parents.

[00:23:13] **Kendra** My grandfather lived with us—my parents and I, when I was a teenager. And then when I went to college, my grandmother—my dad's mother on the other side—lived with them in a split-house situation until she went to go to live assisted living in the last couple years. So, you know, I grew up with my grandparents in our house or with my mom as primary caregiver or different things like that. And also as someone with a disability from a young age, I require a caregiver now. So it's something that was very familiar to me. You know, my mom has negotiated care for so many of my grandparents at this point. And trying to work with the government to get funding for that here in the United States is particularly difficult. And I just deeply related to those conversations that you had had in that way. And, while our circumstances are very different, it was something that I deeply related to and began to wonder why aren't we talking about this more? Why isn't this something that we are highlighting and having discussions about? Because, you know . . . your book I feel like is very unique. But perhaps it shouldn't be. Perhaps we should be talking about this more often and having more stories about it so we're raising more awareness about this very common experience of caring for your parents as they grow older.

[00:24:49] **Vicki** I think so because we're kind of caught between advancing medical science, which means that at my age, I am not the kind of woman that my grandmothers were. I have had better medical care. I still have a gym membership, even though it's on hold in the present circumstances. And actually, I'm secretly rather glad about that one. But I do things. And I have been, in these last couple of years with this book in particular, able to do a number of things that I don't think would have been within the scope of my grandmother's because it was just different, you know, from so many points of view. And I think we've made so many advances, which means that people into older life remain able to do the things they love. And we should be. I mean, go Jane Fonda. You know, really. I'm all for this because I think that we shortchange a very large portion of human potential when we do what we're doing by just segregating people and saying, "You're not relevant," and not thinking about how to integrate everyone.

[00:26:13] **Vicki** And something that I've been struck by now in the present situation is seeing that there is a brutal economic reality underneath a lot of things that are happening. And one of them, I think, is that the spotlight is always on the most productive people economically in our systems and that there is more to life than that. Jacinda Ardern, who is the head of the New Zealand government, has in her budget a whole section that pertains to analyzing human potential and happiness and not money, you know? And I think we have to somehow get around to that. It's kind of a utopia in everyone's mind right now, New Zealand. And I'm sure it's not completely 100 percent rosy. Of course it isn't. But it's quite remarkable to have leaders who are saying—or a leader in this case in this region—who is saying human potential, at whatever age and human fulfillment, which is not a matter of "do you have a six figure salary" is essential. You know?

[00:27:39] **Kendra** I also wanted to talk to you about the role of storytelling in your memoir. Because, I mean, the memoir itself is a story that you are telling other people. But also your mom, as you have mentioned, had the habit of creating wild stories. And then your dad did as well just to kind of cope with things that he went through. Is that something that you were thinking about as you were writing your memoir, that role of storytelling, either on the level that you were writing or in the way that your parents used stories?

[00:28:10] **Vicki** No, I was aware that my mother was a great storyteller because she was really quite spellbinding. I've recently been in contact with a friend of mine from university, which, you know, that was a long, long time ago. And this man had been, when we were students together, had actually met my parents on a couple of occasions and had found my mother absolutely, well, really spellbinding. He said he remembered one time when he was over for dinner or something. And she'd said to him, "Do you know how to samba?" And he said—coming from a good strict Lutheran background, I believe—I don't think he knew how to samba. And my mother said, "I'm going to show you." So she cleared everything away and put on the music and taught him how to samba. And he's never forgotten it. And I think he was probably quite shocked to read my book. He said he had such a different experience of my mother than the truth that I'm trying to tell in my book that he found it really hard to get his mind around. And that's how she was.

[00:29:26] **Vicki** So that wasn't an example for me of storytelling serving a particularly good purpose because that storytelling ability my mother had—and she was actually a brilliant person and extremely good with words, very articulate—and I realized how dangerous that was because I was privy to her telling radically different stories about the same reality. And as a child, I think I always felt like I was walking on quicksand. There was nothing that was fixed. And, you know, when I went to university, I think I did a philosophy course. And they said, okay, we are going to now. . . . One of the first lectures, I think, was something about we are now going to question the notion of absolute reality. And I thought, "Well, I'm going to ace this course because I know absolutely all about this." As far as I'm concerned, reality can be one of any number of different things on a given day with my mother.

[00:30:34] **Vicki** My father would tell stories, which were when he was in his 90s and during the period that book covers, he would tell me stories from the more distant past. You know, he told me a wonderful story about his time when he was in the Air Force training pilots in the Air Force. And I loved that story. And he was quite a literal man. So I don't think he made anything up. But it did have the glow of happiness about it, even though it was a wartime story, and it was not a good time. But I think he held on to those sorts of memories. And I've always hoped that he hung on to memories of being very happy with my mother at the beginning because I think he loved her to the end. I think he loved her very much his entire adult life. And I think he suffered a lot for it. But I'm hoping that he may have had his moments of greatest joy with my mother too, when they were together at the beginning. I hope so.

[00:31:40] **Kendra** There's a moment where you're talking with your father, and you're discussing how much how much he loved her and how you were contemplating that he must to be in this situation now. And I don't want to give any spoilers for anyone who hasn't read the book, but I found that very moving because it was like you had unlocked something about your father that kind of hit you or maybe you'd always known and were just now vocalizing it. But it was just a really important moment, I think, in the book for understanding how everyone was where they were. And again, I'm jumping around spoilers.

[00:32:22] **Vicki** But I think that's true. I mean, I think I knew always that my father was really enthralled to my mother. I mean, she was a brilliant person. And she was a good-looking woman. And she had so much presence as people with the type of mental impediment that she had often . . . they're often extremely convincing and charismatic. And I think he was. . . . I think that was his choice. He chose to be with that person. It doesn't mean he didn't love his children. But when push came to shove, that's where his loyalties were. And she didn't take prisoners. She didn't let you have a lot of leeway in your choices. So I think he knew that if he was with my mother that he needed to be onboard with her, and the rest would just have to kind of fall where it might.

[00:33:31] **Vicki** Now that makes him sound neglectful, which he wasn't. But we're talking about the '50s. We're talking about, you know, seventy years ago, about a time when the guy went out and brought home the bacon. And he brought home a lot of bacon. And the woman stayed at home, raised the children. It was your white picket fence kind of time. And the roles were delineated. I mean, we had first-wave feminism coming up, but it wasn't there yet for my mother in any way. So I think my father wasn't a neglectful father in my book. He never was. I believe he probably did step in when things got extreme because I was never taken away from my parents by social services. So I believe he may have stepped in at some point and said to my mother, "That's enough. This can't be like this." I think my sister disagrees a bit, but I think he did what a good man would do. He tried to provide for his family. He did care about us.

[00:34:39] **Vicki** But he believed my mother when she told him very late in life that she was in touch with me and with my sister—and this was a couple of years before she broke her hip—and that she asked us to go and see him, and that we said we didn't care and we wouldn't go. Now, that wasn't true. We were trying to be in touch with them when we could. My sister tried much harder than I did, but it wasn't true that she was in touch and that we said we would not come to see him. And he believed that. He had the agency to find out something different was true. But he'd made a choice. You know? He didn't phone us and say, "Is this true?" He believed what she said. And that could have been very tragic. He could have died believing that was true. Luckily, he didn't.

[00:35:26] **Kendra** I wanted to ask you about writing this as a memoir. And you've mentioned in other interviews how your life was just a certain way where you and your sister would sit and laugh, and you just can't . . . you just can't make this stuff up. So.

[00:35:46] **Vicki** Which is why I didn't write a novel.

[00:35:49] **Kendra** Well, that's I would to ask you was—I mean, I guess you just answered my question—but what about the memoir form do you think lent to how this story was told and was written?

[00:36:01] **Vicki** You know, I did not make a conscious choice to write a memoir. But as I said earlier, I'd always wanted to write about my family because it was. . . . I mean, our families are what, to a great extent, make us who we are. And we may be more or less successful in modifying various things as we're older. However, in earlier times, when I began to be interested in memoir twenty years before I wrote *THE ERRATICS*, I found that I was swamped with material. There was way too much information. And I could see no way to get a handle on it.

[00:36:43] **Vicki** And when I was going with my sister—and I would fly over; she went more often than I did—but we would meet up at least a couple of times a year, sometimes three over that six-year period, I would go for a period of time. And we would go to my parents' property where my father was. And later, when he moved somewhere else, I would go there. And we would endeavor to keep sorting things out because there was a lot of sorting and things to do, things to unwind. But I realized that I was looking at my parents' lives—at that point in time, after mother broke her hip—I was looking at my parents' lives as an almost completed story because they were in their mid 90s . . . in their 90s at the beginning. And it meant that any huge changes had happened already. And I could see really very clearly in the condition of my father, for example, when we first got there, the ravages of this mental condition that had shaped so much of what our family life had been. And I could see that there was a possibility of writing some of the things about my family, which I did want to try and unwind in writing. Using this six-year framework, I could bring in some of the past and still tell what was often a hilarious story about things that happened to us as we tried to make some sense and put some meaning into the daily lives of these two people.

[00:38:26] **Vicki** So I think I sat down to write that because there were incidences where, as you say, my sister and I would laugh. We would really laugh for a long time, and we'd end up crying almost every time because this situation managed to be often ludicrous and tragic at the same time. And I like that. I mean, I've often told the story of the title of the book, which was just being on a country road near Okotoks, which is near where my parents' property was, and seeing this sign pointing to this enormous rock which was deposited by a glacier many, many centuries ago. And it said, "Visit the Okotoks Erratic." And I was thinking, "Oh, my gosh, that's exactly what I'm doing." When you're a writer, you're kind of superstitious in spite of yourself, and you kind of believe in signs. And I thought, "Okay, there's the title."

[00:39:28] **Vicki** But I didn't really set out to write memoir. I didn't actually set out to write a book, you know, because that's not been what I did for a living. It's been something that was my pleasure for myself. What I love is sitting in front of a blank page, and I write with a pen and paper because I figure my brain is attached to my pen that way. And if I write on the screen, I write much too fast. And I feel like I'm skating across the surface. I much prefer to write on a page. Then when I have something, then I put it on the screen.

[00:40:07] **Kendra** I appreciate you talking about how funny the book is because book is really funny. I laughed out loud so many times.

[00:40:15] **Vicki** I'm so glad.

[00:40:16] **Kendra** I love black humor. I don't know if that's because of where I come from or life circumstances, but I felt like your writing was incredibly subtle in a lot of ways. And the last question about your book that I want to ask you is about the style of writing that you do. And I often pitch it to people when I tell them to read it that the writing . . . that you will tell entire stories in a single sentence. The writing is so subtle, you may not even notice what's going on. And that's something that I love about your book. It's a very slim book. But to me, the information, it was like it was, you know, three times as long. So is that a style that you have cultivated over time? Is that something that you were going for? Or is that just how you naturally express yourself?

[00:41:07] **Vicki** Well, look, you have no idea the joy I am feeling in hearing you say that because that is exactly what I hoped. I wouldn't say I aimed for it because I'm a conscious

writer, very conscious to the extent that I know how I want to put something on the page. In this particular case, I was juggling a lot of things. I did hope to say quite a bit without saying too much. This was never going to be writing that would fit into the category of being a misery dump of some kind. I've seen comments where people said I wanted more details about what happened to her as a child. Well, I thought, "No, that's not what I'm doing." What I'm doing is trying to give a context to explain the type of disjunct that I continue to feel as an adult as a result of who I was as a child and who my mother was when I was a child and an adult. Also, I wanted the spareness. I wanted the contrasts. And I wanted . . . not a distance, but I wanted a kind of possibility of stepping back from things that I think I have in my own life as a result of who I am. I wanted that to be reflected in the writing. And I am so very grateful and happy that you felt that. You don't know the gift you've just given me by saying that. Thank you.

[00:42:55] **Kendra** So before I let you go. Are there other writers that you would recommend? And normally I keep it around like writers from your part of the world, but you're kind of from everywhere. So are there just any writers that you would want to recommend to our listeners?

[00:43:11] **Vicki** Well, there's someone that I like very much. And I was just dipping into some essays of hers. It's Siri Hustvedt. I like her very much. I was reading some essays in a little book called A PLEA FOR EROS. I was acquainted with her when I first read—about four years ago, I think—a short novel she wrote called THE SUMMER WITHOUT MEN. She's a consummate writer. She's wonderful. I also love the memoir form. I'm very fond of nonfiction. I've got on my bedside table right now Mary Norris's book called BETWEEN YOU AND ME because I'm a total comma queen also. My writer's group, they make fun of me because of my insistence on trying to put the commas in the right place. Not that I always get it right, but I'm interested in doing so. And I've been doing a little bit of comfort reading too. I mean, I've got the new Donna Leon mystery book in a pile near me, and I hope to dip into that because a little bit of escapism right now is not a bad thing. I read a lot of poetry. And I've just finished an Australian novel from a few years ago called THE ROSIE PROJECT—I don't know if you have heard of that—by a writer called Graeme Simsion. And it's a very, very funny novel and very well written about . . . it's a romantic kind of novel, but it's very clever, very funny.

[00:44:43] **Vicki** And I think now if we can read things that lift our spirits a little bit too. . . . When we first had isolation restrictions down here in Australia, I thought, "Okay, I'm going to reread Proust." You know? Because I'm very fond of an Australian poet called Clive James. He's one of my all-time favorite people. And he wrote a very nice book called GATES OF LILACS about reading Proust. And I thought, "Okay, I'm going to have some time. Let's go back." And I say reread. I mean, I have read Proust—not the entire REMEBRANCE OF THINGS PAST—but. . . . And I thought, "I'll do that. I have time." Well, did I do that? Six months later. No, I actually. . . . So, you know, I'm still hoping to because I'm kind of, you know, I think we're all coming to terms with doing things slightly differently. But I don't think doing something that raises your spirits right now is a bad thing. I like detective fiction, not gory procedural sort of things. But I have read a couple of books by Alexander McCall Smith, who's written several series that are lighthearted and good writing at the same time. You know, I mean, that box would have to be ticked. So go for the Proust, but raise your spirits too.

[00:46:12] **Kendra** Thank you so much for coming on the podcast and chatting with me. It's been a pleasure.

[00:46:18] **Vicki** Oh, thank you, Kendra. It's been a joy for me. Thank you so much.

[00:46:23] **Kendra** So I'd like to thank Vicki Laveau-Harvie for talking with me about her memoir, *THE ERRATICS*, which is out now in the US from Knopf. You can find her on Facebook and on Instagram, which we will link in the description notes. And, of course, you can find the transcript over on our website as well. I'd also like to give 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.