

Interview with Jen Campbell Pt. 2.mp3

[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 Jen Campbell about her new book, *THE SISTER WHO ATE HER BROTHERS*, which is out now from Thames & Hudson. 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.

[00:00:32] **Kendra** As many of you already know, I am a huge fan of Jen's. Autumn and I talked to her a couple . . . few years ago, actually, now. What is time? And we talked to her about her short story collection, *THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT*. Now Jen is back with another book. This one is *THE SISTER WHO ATE HER BROTHERS*, which is a retelling of fairytales but in this fabulous, creepy sort of way, which is perfect for spooky season. I cannot stress this enough. I loved her book and how creepy and delightful it was and full of wonderful fairytale goodness, as only Jen Campbell can give us. We also talked about how disability and disfigurement are portrayed in the media. That is a huge area that Jen Campbell has spoken out about a lot. And I really appreciate her advocacy for disability rights. And as a disabled person myself, I just really appreciate the perspective that she brings to conversations. And I just love chatting with her. It was definitely the bright spot of my week. And Jen is such a wonderful person to talk to. So . . . so definitely a good time.

[00:01:45] **Kendra** A little bit about Jen before we jump into our conversation. So Jen Campbell is an award-winning poet and short story writer. She also has picture books in the Franklin's Flying Bookshop series. I believe there are three of those. She also has a full-length poetry collection called *THE GIRL AQUARIUM*, which I adore. And you should definitely go check those out. She has other nonfiction books as well. And so I will link her website down in the description so you can go check out all of her books. She also has a wonderful YouTube channel, which I love. She was one of the first BookTubers that I ever watched. And so I always enjoy her content. And so we mention a couple of her videos, and I will link those in the show notes as well. So for this interview, we thought it would be great to start out with Jen reading the introduction of *THE SISTER WHO ATE HER BROTHERS*. And so without further ado, here is Jen reading those first few pages of her wonderful new book.

[00:02:48] **Jen** *THE SISTER WHO ATE HER BROTHERS* is a collection of fourteen gruesome tales from around the world. We've got a sister who longs to eat her family. We've got a boy who tricks a troll in the middle of the night. And we have a castle that screams into the darkness, whose walls are made out of skin. You know all the lovely, cozy, warm, fuzzy stuff. And it is narrated by a person—me, if you like—in a forest who is trying to encourage you to get lost in the dark. So I thought I would read you the introduction.

[00:03:22] **Jen** "Hello, reader. I can see you hovering outside in the dark forest. Come, come inside where it's warm. That's it. Just step over the threshold and close the door behind you. That's better, isn't it? I suppose I should introduce myself. I am here to tell you stories. I adore stories, particularly the gruesome ones. There was a time long ago when these brilliant, horrible tales were known far and wide. But then people changed them. They gave them happily-ever-afters where nothing really awful happened, and, well, a lot of them became boring. So I want to revive those tales of old, the stories where things hide in the dark, the stories where people eat each other, the stories where there are holes in

the center of the Earth with terrible things inside. I'm going to tell you some of my favorite tales. I hope you like them. I hope they please you. You look a little worried, don't be. Oh, you say the door has locked itself behind you? Yes, it has a nasty habit of doing that now. Come in and sit down and listen to what I have to say. I'm sure once the stories are over, you'll be able to leave again. I said, Sit. That's better. Are you comfortable? I hope not. Oh, we're going to have such fun."

[00:05:07] **Kendra** All right, well, welcome back to the podcast, Jen.

[00:05:11] **Jen** I'm so happy to be here. It's so nice. Also, I get to see you this time. I feel like last time we did it, there was no visual. And this is just lovely.

[00:05:17] **Kendra** That's true.

[00:05:18] **Jen** Not for the people listening, obviously. But you know, for us.

[00:05:21] **Kendra** They can imagine, you know?

[00:05:23] **Jen** Yeah.

[00:05:25] **Kendra** But I'm really excited to chat with you again. You are our first return guest ever. So welcome.

[00:05:31] **Jen** I feel very special. Thanks.

[00:05:33] **Kendra** Well, last time we were talking about your short story collection. And this time we're talking about—how do you pitch this book? What . . . I mean, it's a children's book, right? But what genre of children's book?

[00:05:46] **Jen** It's a good question and one I should probably have an answer to by now. But yeah, I guess I just say . . . I don't tend to say short story collection; I just say fairytale retellings. But it's both. It is a short story collection or fairytale retellings. And yes, it is for . . . we're recommending eight upwards just because it is a bit scary, but definitely also for teenagers and adults who . . . I mean, it's the kind of book that I enjoy reading anyway. I mean, I would. I wrote it. But you know what I mean? It's that kind of book that I think can span lots of different . . . lots of different ages. And I leave it up to parents, really, as to how young they would like to inflict it on their children. Because I did a reading of it over Zoom, not over Zoom, over FaceTime with my niece and nephew who are five and eight. Primarily, I was doing it for my nephew, who's eight, but obviously they're siblings. One can't have one thing and the other not have it. So my niece was very much there, and she really liked it. In fact, I wanted to put quotes on the book for them because this is a pandemic book, which I'm sure we'll talk about, but that meant there was no proof copies to send to authors. So we didn't have all the quotes before it came out. And my niece's quote was "Gross." And my nephew's quote was "Disgusting." And I thought they'd be great quotes to have on the outside of the book, you know? So how do I pitch it? Gross and disgusting. Gross and disgusting fairytale retellings and harking back to traditional tales of old but with a diverse set of characters, queer representation, positive representation of disability and disfigurement. There you go. That was a very long elevator pitch story.

[00:07:30] **Kendra** Well, I think this, obviously, first is perfect for this time of year. Halloween is almost upon us. In fact, when this goes up, it'll be just a few days away. And I

listened to . . . you had some readings of this. I listened to that. And then I read the rest. And it is delightfully creepy.

[00:07:49] **Jen** Thank you.

[00:07:51] **Kendra** I really, really loved it. And like you just mentioned, like, fairytales traditionally are pretty gruesome. So this really kind of fits the bill.

[00:08:01] **Jen** Yeah. I, in "normal times," go into schools and talk to kids about the history of fairytales and teach poetry, especially for years five and six, which is ages about ten and eleven. So I think this was really why I wanted to write this book because I've been spending so much time with kids of that age talking about fairytales. And I delight in telling children of that age or people of any age about the history of fairytales and how gruesome they used to be. And I think that a lot of people associate gruesome fairytales with the Grimm brothers. But actually the Grimms were responsible for sanitizing fairytales and making them more palatable to children. They did publish gruesome fairytales in their first collection of fairytales, which was published in 1812 and 1815. They did it in two volumes. But then over the following decades, they made them more child friendly—whatever that means because this book is child friendly, and it's definitely more gory than theirs. But that's what they wanted to do. They wanted to market it for children, whereas previous to that, fairytales weren't really necessarily for children. They were for everyone, and everyone told them. And the amount of gore depended on who you happened to be talking to. You know, people got baked into pies. People ate each other. It was. . . . It was a good time.

[00:09:25] **Kendra** They actually kind of reminds me sometimes of mythology because all sorts of weird stuff happens in mythology. And I just love any sort of fairytale, folk tale, that kind of vein. Love it. And I think sometimes when people think of fairytales, I guess now they do, it's more like the Disneyfied version of fairytales where they're very much turned into happy endings and all sorts of things. But also, you didn't just stick with European fairytales; you went all over the world. And I love that. This year we're doing our international theme for Reading Women. And so I felt like it was such a great fit. So how did you decide what fairytales that you wanted to retell? And how many did you have to leave on the cutting room floor because they wouldn't fit in the book?

[00:10:15] **Jen** Lots. Lots. And also not just because they wouldn't fit, because I could only had a limited word count. So I've included fourteen and maybe. . . . Should I list the countries that they're from so people know? So we've got tales from Korea, Iceland, Japan, Norway, Nigeria, an Inuit fairytale, one from Egypt, Germany, Russia, El Salvador, South Africa, India, China, and Spain. So we don't even have one from England. I thought, okay, we're going to pick and choose. I'll just . . . I'll not put in one where I'm from. We'll have them from . . . from other places. There were lots of reasons that I had to leave things out. There are so many that I love that I couldn't include because they had too many similar themes with another one that I wanted to include. There are only so many stories about people, as I said, being baked into pies that you could have. If it was up to me, I might have a whole book of them. But I don't think that that's showing diversity, you know? So I decided, let's just have, say, one of them. Maybe there's two. There's definitely, you know, some cannibalistic ones in here, but not all of them.

[00:11:19] **Jen** And then it was interesting, actually, the process of collecting them, I felt it changed over time because I had hoped when I started researching it—because I have researched fairytales for years anyway, and I have a huge selection of fairytales from

around the world. So many different books. And I had assumed, even though I hadn't come across them yet in my years of researching them, that in an intense researching period of looking at fairytales, I would discover fairytales that had great representation of disfigurement. I don't know why I thought this would happen, Kendra, because we struggle to find it now. But I thought maybe . . . and I will find some. And I'm not saying that they didn't exist. It's just that people had their agendas when they collected them and wrote them down. I'm sure that those are the ones that got left behind, along with a lot of the queer stories.

[00:12:12] **Jen** So I had hoped that I was going to find more that I didn't have to change too much to have that inclusivity. I don't mind the changing of fairytales. Every storyteller has their own agenda, but I thought it'd be really cool if I could find fairytales that happen to have that anyway. I haven't found them yet. There is a fairytale in here about a princess who has alopecia, and I did find a few different fairytales with princesses who had alopecia. But the end of them was always that she desperately wanted her hair back, and if she was good, that's what happened. And I was trying to find one where that didn't happen, and I couldn't find it. So I was like, Well, okay, fine, I'm just going to have to choose one of these, and I will change it myself. So I think I was mining a lot of the time trying to find that great representation. And then the more it went on, the deeper I got into the project, I just thought, you know what, I'm going to have to do this myself because it's just not here. It's just not here. At least, not in the ones that I could find.

[00:13:15] **Jen** So I included ones that kind of focused on different dynamics. I didn't want to have lots of love stories in here. There is only . . . no, there are two happy-ending love wise stories in here. One of those is a straight couple. One of those is a queer couple. All the rest have not very nice relationships in them. And that's definitely a theme that runs throughout. And I didn't mind that very much. And I wanted to have, as you pointed out, fairytales from over the world. So geographically spread out quite far, which I think I did achieve. So it was . . . it was interesting to think about which ones to keep and which ones not to keep. And there were many that I did want to include that I couldn't because they were so long. There are some ridiculous fairytales out there, like Jon Bautista Basil's version of Hansel and Gretel, which is called Nino and Ninella. Starts off as the Hansel and Gretel tale that we know. But then once they've escaped from the cottage in the wood, Ninella becomes a pirate. And she steals a ship, and she sails out to sea. And her brother's eaten by a fish that has loads of treasure in its stomach, and she manages to cut him free. And that's really cool. But I don't have the . . . that's a novel. I don't have the space. So there were lots of different reasons for choosing the ones that I ended up using—themes, length, representation, and geography as well. But there were ones I loved.

[00:14:49] **Kendra** I really love the variety and diversity, like you said, in the collection. And one of the things that you do on your BookTube channel—which will be linked in the show notes of the episode—is you do a lot of history of fairytales like you said, but you also talk about disability and disfigurement as it relates to fairytales. So I thought, since we are both here and we both, you know, read disability lit and talk about such things that we could have a little chat about that as well because now that I read more disability literature, I realize more and more how much people don't talk about disability specifically in stories. And we definitely need more of that.

[00:15:28] **Jen** We definitely do need more of that. And that was actually, researching the book, one of the things that I found quite depressing, actually. I suppose in a time where disabled people have been dismissed by a lot of society, more often than usual in the last

eighteen months, it was depressing to constantly read old fairytales where "the bad guy" was, you know, someone who had a disfigurement or a disability and made me more acutely aware of the need to have better representation of disfigurement and disability in fairytales, as a disabled person with disfigurements myself. And I do, at the same time, objectively find the history of fairytales interesting and how it intersects with disability. And I think we spoke about that last time when we were talking about Amanda Leduc's book *DISFIGURED*, which explores those themes a lot. And I think Amanda's work is is great. And we had a chat when she was writing that book because she'd been watching my videos on the subject too. There is a whole period mainly focused around the Victorian times, where science and freak shows and storytelling, primarily folklore, kind of come together in this big . . . I'm going to call a circus . . . in this big . . . this circus of storytelling. And it was a time when authors and storytellers were panicking because they thought they should be incorporating science into their writing for children. Gone were the times of innocence. It was all about—well, not gone—but it was . . . it was more about how can we teach children things instead of giving them fairy stories? Because that's what was fashionable. Science was really cool. So how can we do this?

[00:17:10] **Jen** So there are amazing fairytales where fairies would balance equations. And you could count elements on fairies' wings. And a lot of upper-class Victorian children would have microscopes at home so they could look at things. And the Thames was called "monster soup" because people had realized how disgusting it was because they looked at it under a microscope. And there was this mythology flying around that if germs existed and those were bad, then maybe fairies were things that also existed, but were too small for us to see—and that fairies could combat the germs. So people invented things like fairy soap. And in the UK, we still have Fairy Washing Up Liquid, which is like my favorite fact. That's why we have Fairy Washing Up Liquid because it was thought that fairies in it would clean your kitchen. I just think that's really great.

[00:18:07] **Jen** And then in freak shows, which were so popular during the Victorian times, people like P. T. Barnum and other freak-show owners would create folklore for disabled people in their shows. And they would use disabled people as "proof of evolution." They would say, Okay, well, this person is part lion and part person. So they're part animal. They're not fully human. This is proof of evolution. This is their origin story. Everyone come and come and see them. And whilst I would love to be referred to as a mythical creature—that would be very nice—it's also obviously quite messed up and . . . and not cool. So there is that intersection with fairytale and disability there. You know, we've always created fairytales to explain things that we don't understand, and that's one of those things. You know, why is someone born with this condition? For instance, of my condition, which is ectrodactyly, it used to be called and sometimes still is called Lobster Claw Syndrome because people tend to be born with not two fingers, but two sections of bone that can then be separated into more fingers. But it looks like two fingers. And it was said that if someone was born with ectrodactyly or lobster claw, their mother must have eaten shellfish when she was pregnant. So you can see the kind of fairytales that build up out of that. But I think now it's a time to reclaim that and retell them and put our own stamp on them, really. Yes.

[00:19:42] **Kendra** Yeah. It's one of those things that once you . . . once you see it, you can't unsee it. It's like once you're aware of how intimately fairytales and disfigurement and disability are connected and how it's always at the end that, you know, the beast becomes human again or whatever. It's always that they return to being more "human." It just really. . . . You know, as a kid, I used to just love them. And I would just read them. And as an adult, I'm like, Oh, wow, this is . . . this is . . . this is a problem. Like. . . .

[00:20:17] **Jen** Let's dissect that a bit. Exactly. Exactly. And I think that is inherently tied up with religious messages of redemption because a lot of fairytales do have questionable morals at the end. You know, if you're good, this will happen to you. And if you're not, this will happen to you. And disability is used as a metaphor or an allegory. But we're not metaphors. We're people. So like nuanced storytelling. . . . And you're right, Beauty and the Beast was inspired by a real life person called Petrus Gonsalvus, who had hypertrichosis, which is where hair grows all over your body. And he was well known as a person because he was passed through the courts in the late 1500s as an oddity. And he was married to a woman called Lady Catherine in this kind of like weird joke because they thought. . . . It was . . . it was someone that the royals didn't like, Lady Catherine. So they're, "We'll marry you off to Petrus Gonsalvus, and we won't let you meet him beforehand." But by all accounts, they ended up loving each other very much. And then they had seven children together. And about a hundred or so years after that, Beauty and the Beast, the first novel, was written. And there are lots of animal bride/bridegroom stories. And so that is based on that. But it is thought that Petrus Gonsalvus was also a big, a big inspiration for that story.

[00:21:42] **Jen** But as you say, at the end, the Beast—or in the Disney version he's called Adam. I love they never called him "Adam" in the film. And then I think when they brought out merch, they were like, "Oh my god, what are we. . . ? What's his name? We didn't give him a name. Well, we have to call him Adam. Adam. That was definitely his name. Definitely. We definitely said that in the film." They just never did. It was confused me because I had a doll. Or maybe my sister did, and I used to steal it. But it was a doll of Adam. And then you could turn him into the beast. And you could put a mask on him, and he would become the beast again. Yeah, I think it's, you know, as you say, we enjoy these things when we don't critically think about them. Sometimes, though, there are more obvious instances like Scar in "The Lion King," which I think I always realized was a bit, like, not okay. But I think it's really good that we're having these conversations more and more. I think it's important.

[00:22:37] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah. My mom actually read Amanda Leduc's book after . . . I think it was last year she and I had a conversation. I don't remember. Because we were always a big Disney family. We loved, you know, my mom read mythology to me as a child. Like, it was always something that was part of my childhood. And I said, You know, Mom, I still love Disney. But we need to have a conversation about this and talk to kids about this because you know, the idea that beauty equals—beauty, stereotypical beauty, etc.—equals goodness and if you are disfigured in any way, that must mean you've done something bad . . . that is an incredibly harmful concept. You know, not just because people with disfigurements and who look different in any way are, you know, always become the villains. But also in a very real sense now, those of us with invisible disabilities don't get health care because we're not considered actually disabled because, oh, you're too pretty to be disabled. And I'm like, where is the logic in that statement? And it's taken, you know, a long time, you know, before doctors actually believe me. It's usually like they want to do all their own tests and whatever. So the whole system is then really screwed up in America. We're already struggling, you know. Like, we need all the help that we could get for that. And so she and I were able to have this great conversation. And I come from a family of disabled people, but there's never been any sort of critical thinking on disability studies. It's just been, oh, this is just the way we all live. And I'm like, well, how about . . . how about let's talk about this because, you know, my niece and nephew already show signs of like problems with food and certain things. So it's definitely a conversation starter, particularly when these stories are always in our house, you know?

[00:24:33] **Jen** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, fairytales in particular are so much an embedded part of our culture. And I think that's why we don't question them as much because they've always been there. And as adults, we then have all this nostalgia tied up in it. And I think we're less quick to unpick things that we think favorably of through the lens of nostalgia. And I think we can excuse things we wouldn't in other forms. Oh, because it's . . . it's just the story. And it's just a fairytale. And I know that you must. To see that it is kind of exhausting, to kind of always discuss things from that starting point with people of breaking down that, no, it's not just the story because it does impact people's perception. Media is so, so much a part of how we perceive the world—and not just talking about fairytales here, but books, films, everything. And the disfigurement villainy trope in particular, and also disabilities inspiration porn, these two things are so prevalent that they are things that we . . . that we have to talk about. And the question is no longer, "Is this an issue?" because it's been proven so many times by people in the field. That's not a question that's going on at the heart of the matter anymore. We've got charities that changing faces U.K. and face equality, who work with the BFI, which is the British Film Institute. And the BFI now no longer will fund films that have villains but disfigurements because they acknowledge the research that's been done into how it affects how people perceive people with disabilities and therefore how people who are disabled are treated in real life. That isn't the conversation. The conversation is not, doesn't matter. And it's frustrating that that's always where we have to start is proving that it matters when it's already been proven. And it's the shows because our voices aren't listened to. We're often not believed.

[00:26:34] **Jen** And you said before, I thought it was really interesting. I'm paraphrasing you, sorry, but you were saying you didn't know the origin of where this comes from. If I don't see you as disabled online, and I get that to you and people say I wasn't looking at your hands for anyone to sing, I have acted actually, which is missing hands, missing hands. I don't have this thing hands. I have missing fingers. I get that one right. That's not what I have missing fingers. I wasn't. I didn't notice you hadn't because I was listening to all the lovely things you were saying or stuff like that. Because disability was always seen as separates itself, like, it's not part of you. It's something you must want to disassociate from, but it's disabled people. That's not something that we can do or even particularly want to do. We are whole beings. It is not something that has been put on us because we've done something bad. It's not something that's an extension of our being. It is us. You know, there's that whole line of, you know, don't be defined by x y z. And one of those things can be disability. Is that okay? But it's not something to be ashamed of. And we need to talk about how these labels are important to us and how disability impacts their life and how society interacts with that. Otherwise, we never move forward and things get buried. We don't talk about them, and nothing gets solved. So I think we both say that we are proudly disabled people and that it is part of our identity and that that is okay. Yeah, we didn't break things by saying that. I feel like maybe we did, maybe broke a fourth wall that we're breaking out of a story of ourselves and be like, Excuse me, this is real life. Like, we are disabled. That's fine, and we don't need to transform magically into something else to have our happily ever after. We'd just like better health care. Thanks.

[00:28:19] **Kendra** Yes. Yes. Cosign all the way. Better health care as I'm always waiting for one medication or another to be re-approved by my insurance. I get really frustrated with people when they talk about disability because sometimes they'll say, Oh, disabled people, they can do everything we can do, just they just do it differently. And I'm like, No, actually, I can't do everything you can do, and that's still okay. Like, it doesn't matter if I can't work as long or do whatever, I'm still a valuable human being. And that's not

necessarily a bad thing. It's only a bad thing if you, like, believe that this model of production equals worse situation, which we won't go into today, but just insert rant here.

[00:29:06] **Jen** Capitalism. But also, I used to be that person. I used to be that person because I think as disabled people, we all go through. I hate the word charity. We'll get through our journey with ableism, right? Internalized ableism. And I used to think that I couldn't say that I was disabled because that would, not make me less, but I'd always been told— because you say you come from a family of disabled people, I don't; and I am the only disabled person in my family—and my parents—from a place of love, I have to say, I'm not here to bash—my parents always used to tell me I'm not disabled. And you're not, you're not like them. And they thought that was a nice thing to say to me, you know. And it was always that I had to prove that I could do things just as well as everybody else. And as you said earlier, I just did them differently because that's what you're rewarded for. And it's a really difficult thing to break down. And I'm still challenging myself on that all the time because, as you said, we're in a . . . in a capitalist society that rewards productivity. And there are good things about that and also really not great things about that.

[00:30:18] **Kendra** Working on it, working on it. I, you know, I have no one on any exam. So I'm always doing, doing, doing. And I'm very hard on myself the most in that perfectionist way. And I've always felt like I had to go above and beyond. That has really hurt me as an adult leader because I've lost a lot of ground because I didn't take care of my body during college and afterwards, you know, there wasn't the idea of taking care of your body for the future. It was always work, work, work until you drop. And that's not a very healthy outlook, particularly if you are already disabled and you have fewer spoons than most people.

[00:30:58] **Jen** Oh, definitely. I mean, I used to. I feel I'm getting déjà vu. I can't remember if I said that last time we talked, or maybe we've just just when we chatted in general, I don't know. But I used to at university write my exams like, I mean, like most people I guess do, but it used to. . . . I used to be in tears in that exam because I can't write for long periods of time. I've had dozens and dozens of operations to craft hands. And I can write a little bit. But you know that intense writing and exams that, my god, must get everything down. I just used to bawl my eyes out during the exam. And then my partner said to me—and it was in fourth year of university, so because in Scotland, you do four years of university instead of three—said, "Why don't you request a computer? Because you can do that." And I was like, No, it's definitely a failure. I can't do that. So anyway, I ended up going to the disability studies unit and asking—I was really apologetically—can I use a computer? And they were like, Yeah. And I'm like, okay, this was here all along, and the only person stopping me using it was me. I mean, not only me, clearly it was the world at large. You had made me feel these things about myself, and that was why I didn't go. But yeah, we can be our own worst enemy sometimes as well. It's okay. You can do that thing. You can ask for the assistance. That is fine.

[00:32:20] **Kendra** It's like you mentioned that it was, you know, fairly fairly recently—within the last few years—that you came to view yourself as disabled. And I feel like I've definitely been on a similar trajectory where I felt like, because I was productive, I couldn't call myself "really disabled" because, like, I wasn't disabled enough. Can you talk a little bit about that and how that's changed your perspective on your work?

[00:32:49] **Jen** Yeah, I think it's the reason I didn't use the word disabled, which I think I touched on before, is because I always said I had a disfigurement. That was something I was very comfortable saying. Like, I have scars. I have missing fingers. I have a

disfigurement—that made the most sense to me. And that's also true, as well as being disabled. And I also thought because I could do that, I can do all the things that you do kind of think that it was a necessary label to use kind of thought that if I took it, someone else could use the word, which is not how words work. But that was just something that I thought.

[00:33:25] **Jen** And then it was . . . it was. . . . It was a lot of different things. I think I'm oh, there are so many topics that we could talk about. But . . . but briefly, my partner and I are currently going through IVF. And I think it's when . . . when you start, maybe you just it's an age, but also you start thinking about children, you think about your childhood and your identity and all of that stuff. And so that was something that made me reflect on it more. Plus, the disability that I have is a degenerative one, so I have many more things in Equus wrong with me. I hate the word wrong. I have interesting things that I am dealing with on a day-to-day basis better, which meant that I felt more comfortable using that word. I think it was more about—can I be really cheesy?—I think was about liking myself. I think I was keeping that part of myself very separate and not liking it. And that's sad. And I think it was a process of actually liking myself. I went to therapy, Kendra. Canuto and I did some therapy because of medical stuff that I was going through. I am losing my eyesight. And it was recommended you, we have someone in the diseases clinic that I go to. Would you like to talk to them? And at first I was like, I don't have time for that. I am fine. And then obviously, I went to see her. And I was just like, Let's just talk about things. So that was a really lovely process of kind of—except I've got it sounds so cheesy; I'm so sorry—accepting that part of myself and learning to engage with, I think, my childhood self and what I needed as as a kid in in literature, in stories as well is just, you know, day-to-day life that people need that representation.

[00:35:09] **Jen** We need to have these open conversations. And that was also prompted by other work that I do. I go into schools, as I said, to talk to kids about fairytales, but I also talk about disability and disfigurement. I do crosswords, grassroots, work with disabled writers and speak with publishers about the representation of disability in publishing and all of those things cumulatively. It gave me the confidence to really talk more openly about being a disabled person and also include that in part of my work. And I hadn't written about disability when I first started writing. I have ten books published now. My first one was published in 2012. And I have worked in the publishing industry for fifteen years. And I know how ablest it can be. As I'm not saying publishing is like that, everything is like that. But you know, I've been in editorial meetings where editors have talked about the palatability of disability and how disabled stories always have to have a moral, which I think feeds into what we were saying about fairytales. It has to teach children something. And by teach children something, they mean teach non-disabled children about disability. Whereas my thought is that, yes, there are some times, especially for kids books, instances where teaching children about things is really important. But also we need incidental representation in our voices work where the story is not about being disabled, but it is about disabled people and adventures that they go on or things that they do.

[00:36:41] **Jen** So I think I've just been thinking a lot about representation and wanting to incorporate that more in my work. And I've definitely done that in the last five years. But before that, I didn't because I thought it wouldn't get published, which I think has some truth to it as well. And now that I have a lot of books behind me, I feel more confident in delivering proposals of stories to publishers with disabled protagonists because I have a track record that they can, I guess, respect—even if they don't particularly understand why I've written, for instance, a picture book that has a disabled protagonist in the story has

nothing to do with why he's disabled. Yeah, it's taken a while. That was a very long answer. You're so welcome.

[00:37:36] **Kendra** No, I think it's . . . I think it's really important that folks hear these stories because disability is a unique group where you become . . . you become disabled at any time. And so when you even . . . when you grow up with something like this, you still struggle with that internalized ableism. So when someone becomes disabled, they often bring their own ableism with them into like a therapy groups or their activism or whatever they do. And a friend even told me that in her disability like group therapy group, they separate people who've been disabled since they were a small child or were born with it versus those who became, you know, disabled after adolescence. And I was like, that's a great idea. So I think it's important for people to understand that when one disabled person says something, that doesn't mean that they're automatically like. Goes forth right? I was talking with someone recently who recently learned that they are disabled. And they kept talking about the medical model of disability versus the social model disability. And you could tell, like they thought they had figured it out. And I'm just like, okay, well, we'll talk again in three years. We'll see what you think after you try to get health care. And maybe you'll realize, like the social model of disability actually is quite important to think about and discuss. We'll just say that. And so I have really appreciated now that I go out and try to find books by other disabled people that you get all of these different perspectives because we also have such a wide range of conditions, right? So one person experience you have the same condition is going to be different, let alone entire other thing.

[00:39:21] **Jen** Absolutely. And also, I feel like that's something that has helped me speak about and include disability more in my writing is consuming work by other disabled people and talking with other disabled people, which I never did. I never had met anyone who had. . . . I've met one person now who has my my own condition, but I never encountered other kids who were going through similar things, like having a life that was half in and half out of hospital. I was always the odd one out. But disabled people are the biggest minority group and the most underrepresented minority group in publishing specifically. But, you know, in other areas too. And it's so empowering to hear other people talk about their experiences. And I think that there's a lot of stuff that we compartmentalize as disabled people, because—like I think about EDS, it's not palatable to to the wider world. I used to have a dual life. I would never talk about my operations or hospital stuff with my friends at school, even though I wasn't at school at the time because I was in hospital. And it was just an understood thing that we never talked about it. And it would always be hushed by teachers of any kids wanted to ask me because they thought it was embarrassing and I wouldn't want to talk about it.

[00:40:49] **Jen** And so I do think, as you said, it's so important that it's not. People talk about their experiences so that you can see the cross over in your own experiences, but also the difference too. And anyone listening who hasn't read *SITTING PRETTY* by Rebecca Taussig, I would so recommend reading. It's such a great introduction, I think, specifically to social models of disability that you were just talking about, Kendra, and how that's really where we need to focus a lot of our attention to representation and accessibility and health care. The things that if we're going to use this in a different way, the things that disabled . . . disabled people, the things that make life difficult.

[00:41:28] **Jen** I think, you know, there are . . . there was a really horrible experiment—that sounds much more dramatic than it is, but just wasn't very nice—it was a social experiment where Irish celebrities were being wheelchair users for a day a couple of weeks ago. And it was . . . it was horrendous. And the main person who done it uploaded

an Instagram video afterwards, saying how horrific the experience had been and how she didn't know how disabled people weren't depressed all the time. And, you know, she couldn't wait to get out of her chair. There are lots of things talk about that. I think, you know, it is very difficult. It can be very difficult when you first start using a wheelchair because it's new. Like anything new, you have to get to grips with it. But the thing that is really difficult if you're using a wheelchair is accessibility of places and other people's attitudes. Wheelchairs are freeing things for so many people. They are a means of accessing places. They're a way of getting around. And that is so delightful and joyful that all she could talk about was how horrendous it was because she had the choice to get out of the wheelchair at the end of the day. And that is focusing on the medical model of . . . medical model of disability. And she felt she was limited because of her body when, in fact, the thing that was limiting is how inaccessible places are to wheelchair users. And that's the narrative that we need to focus on more, I think.

[00:43:04] **Kendra** Yeah, because in all honesty, I can't do a lot of things anymore. But the thing that hurts my mental health the most is trying to interact with people who are like, I know you're disabled, but can you just, like, quickly read this? And I'm like, I can't read texts most of the time. So like, you know, even if I could, you're asking me basically to have a broken foot and walk around without crutches. Like, that's not healthy. That's healthy for like everything. And so I feel like books like SITTING PRETTY have really helped me in understanding that, like, it's not just in my head, like, this is . . . this is a real thing that people will deny is happening, but it actually is there. And that's been incredibly helpful to process a lot of things, particularly during the pandemic, is all of these wonderful books by other disabled people are just so helpful.

[00:44:01] **Jen** So helpful, so helpful. And it's really. . . . I am having to battle also a feeling of myself when we're talking about this because my brain, some of my brain is going, some non-disabled people are going to listen to this and think that we are whining. I'm like, That's the kind of thing that you have to deal with as well. That internalized ableism is still there. We're just speaking truths. We should be okay with them with, with speaking the truth. And there is a great collection of two collections of essays is this DISABILITY VISIBILITY and also GROWING UP DISABLED IN AUSTRALIA. And I think it was an essay in GROWING UP DISABLED IN AUSTRALIA, where one of the writers said they felt conflicted because they knew that focusing on the social model was important, but also their pain, like physical pain was very real. And I'm like, Yeah, okay, we need to dance between the two of these things. And focusing on the social model doesn't mean we're not in pain anymore, but it does mean that we can access things that could maybe help with the pain, the greater understanding of the pain, and it would be less emotionally exhausting.

[00:45:07] **Kendra** Well, I know we could keep on talking forever. But, you know, life awaits. So I'll just have a couple of closure questions for you before I let you go. So you have written so many different books, and I think I've read all but two of them. So you've done nonfiction and picture books and the short story collection. You've written poetry, written all of the things. So for you, what is your dream project at this point? Is there something that you would still love to complete and put out into the world that you haven't yet?

[00:45:43] **Jen** Yes. And it's hard to separate what I want and what the publishing world would would want because I think the goal for a lot of publishers is always "write the novel." And that's not one that I've done yet. I've tried. I have. Let me just hold my hands up and say that I have tried. And it still might happen. And middle-grade novel, maybe.

Also, I am working on a nonfiction book about fairytales and disfigurement. And it's part memoir. And I think that's a book that's going to take a long time. Not necessarily because the writing process is a long time, but I feel as though, Oh, it's going to sound like a complete trap. But I think that I'm in a bit of a transitional period in my life, and I feel like I can't complete the book without including, especially if it's part, memoir, the next couple of years. And my thoughts, I feel like, about certain topics are still evolving. And I don't think you can ever reach a specific conclusion with a nonfiction book that is partly based on your life experiences because hopefully you're still living, you know? But I feel like it needs to breathe a bit longer and needs to exist and grow along with me for a couple of years. So that is a project that is ongoing in the background all the time. I have written a new picture book. And I am working on a new collection of short stories that basically I still want to do all the things. And it still makes my agent cry. But he's just going to have to deal with it because I have a very short attention span.

[00:47:33] **Kendra** Well, I am very excited. I think the particularly the memoir / fairytales thing I think will be just . . . just brilliant. But yeah, I mean, so that stuff really has to sit in like, I don't know, Germany admiring like the Great British Bake Off, where they put the thing in the proving drawer. And they have to wait the perfect amount of time, too early or too late to be bad. Just right?

[00:47:55] **Jen** Yeah, I think . . . I think that that is true. And I would also like to do more fairytale related stuff like THE SISTER WHO ATE HER BROTHERS. And I am in discussions about that at the moment, about other types of collected fairytales that I could do. I have a specific one in mind that I hope to do in the next year or so, but I don't think I'm allowed to talk about it yet. And being that person? Sorry, I can't talk about it.

[00:48:19] **Kendra** Have you ever thought of doing like a cookbook? Because I know you bake a lot.

[00:48:24] **Jen** and know people say that to me. In fact, a publishing company reached out to me last year and was like, Hey Jen, do you . . . do you . . . ? Should we do a cookbook? I'm like, No, I don't know. I am not very good at making up recipes, at least not yet. I definitely just use other people's recipes, so it would be a lot of plagiarism going on. I think I just did a cookbook. So that's not something that's on my agenda right now. I never say never. I mean, I may get better at inventing things myself. But at the moment, it's a fun hobby that I like doing. And you know, as I'm sure you know, I think it is important to have things that are hobbies too. And the cooking can be the hobby. And sometimes it intersects with my job because part of my job is making YouTube videos. And sometimes I do baking videos for that. But I don't at this point in time want it to be something that feeds into writing of books. I would like it to exist as a nice thing that I can do when I need to de-stress.

[00:49:21] **Kendra** So the last question I have for you is what books would you recommend to our listeners? And they can be books about disability, fairytales, both or really anything you read that you think they might enjoy reading as well?

[00:49:33] **Jen** Well, DISFIGURED by Amanda Loder, as we mentioned before, and SITTING PRETTY by Rebecca Towels Egg. But if I wanted to recommend some books given that we're talking about, well, touching on the spooky things, I recently read MRS. MARCH by Virginia Veto, which I really enjoyed. That has already been made and is being made into a film right now starring Elisabeth Moss. So if you're someone who wants to, you know, get ahead of the game and read the book before it becomes a film, then I would

recommend reading that. It's about a woman whose husband is an author. And she goes to the bakery one day, and the person behind the till says, What do you think about your husband's new book and how he's based his main character on you? And she's appalled because she's heard that the main character is horrible and dresses badly and sleeps around. And she hasn't read this new book, and she's just absolutely flabbergasted that maybe everyone in the town is talking about her behind her back. So she rushes home. But she can't ask her husband outright about this, so she tries to find subtle ways to investigate what he's doing. It kind of reminds me a little bit of *Attention Mossberg*, especially *Death in Her Hands* because she's a very unreliable narrator. And then it also reminded me of *THE WIFE* by Meg Wolitzer. And I was going to say something, but that would be a spoiler for that, for *THE WIFE*. So I won't. But that kind of behind-the-scenes literary career things. But taking it to an extreme that's not particularly realistic, but is very fun. So I love that. And I think it's very unsettling, rather than creepy, probably, though, I think it does have a creepy element in it too. I just really love this. Would recommend that.

[00:51:15] **Jen** I also recently read *THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY* by Patricia Highsmith, which I'd never read before, and had such fun reading that. In fact, both of those books are set in the 1950s. I loved it. And again, there is a new version of *THE TALENTED MR. RIPLEY*, which is being made at the moment with Andrew Scott. I assume that he is playing Mr. Ripley, but he could be playing, which yet I'm not sure, but that is about a man who is a sociopath who wants to really get involved in someone else's life in an uncomfortable kind of way. And I love reading Patricia Highsmith's books because for the most part, the ones I've read are either overtly queer or have queer undertones too. And you don't often see that in books in the 1950s, so I appreciate that.

[00:52:05] **Kendra** Well, all of those sound fabulous. And I'll make sure to link them below. But thank you so much for coming on the podcast. And I really loved chatting with you, as always. It's delightful.

[00:52:14] **Jen** Thank you. It was lovely to be here. Thank you so much.

[00:52:20] **Kendra** And that's our show. Many thanks to Jen Campbell for coming on the show and talking with me about her new book, *THE SISTER WHO ATE HER BROTHERS*, which is out now from Thames and Hudson. You can find Jen on her website, jencampbell.uk and on social media (@jenvcampbell), both of which will be linked in our show notes. 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.