

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 84: Anthologies

Guest: Kelly Jensen

Host: Alice Wong

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Introduction

[hip-hop beat with radio static]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, there. Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is all about anthologies with Kelly Jensen, a writer and editor who has a new anthology out now, titled *Body Talk: 37 Voices Explore Our Radical Anatomy*. I also have a new anthology out this summer titled *Disability Visibility* and am so excited to have this conversation with Kelly as two disabled editors. You'll hear about the unique aspects of anthologies, Kelly's approach to finding contributors and editing their writing, and the wondrous radicalness of bodies. And full disclosure: I have an essay in *Body Talk* about saliva, and I hope you check it out if you get a chance to read Kelly's book! Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we gooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: OK! So, Kelly, I am so delighted to have you on my podcast today!

KELLY JENSEN: I'm so excited to be part of your podcast. Thank you for asking me.

ALICE: Oh, this is a pleasure. And Kelly, why don't we start with you just introducing yourself and sharing anything about your background?

KELLY: Sure. I am a full-time editor for Book Riot, which is the largest independent book website in North America. And I've been with them for about six years now, I believe. Prior to that, I worked as a librarian with young people, with teenagers. And one of the things that I missed so much about libraries was working with those teens and being the sort of person who considers them in their role in the community and in the library. So, when I took this Book Riot job, which I love, I miss working with young people. So, I realized that there was a real opportunity to use my skills as a writer and an editor to continue to work with young people through books that really tackle the topics that are relevant and important to them.

ALICE: Thank you for that. And we are recording this conversation in late March of 2020, and we are right in the midst or kind of the beginnings of this coronavirus pandemic. So, I just wanted to check with you on how you're doing and just any thoughts and comments you have about how you're kind of faring right now.

KELLY: You know, I [sighs]... every day is a little bit different. So, in addition to working as an editor, I teach yoga. And my yoga studio closed like, we closed for two weeks in response to

everything going on, but the owner closed permanently as of yesterday because she can't afford it. So, I lost that job. And I'm really lucky that it was just a couple nights a week. This was not my main source of income. So, I know how lucky I am for that. But it was something that brought me, and still brings me, so much joy working with others in a way that really feels good. You know, it's body and mind work, and it's a really rewarding thing to do. So, it's hard for me to kind of process what after is going to look like, because so much of now is not that different for me since I've always worked from home. But it's going to feel weird not getting back into the routines that I had. But it's like it's upsetting, and at the same time, I think to myself, I am healthy, and I get to work from home. And there are so many things that are bigger and harder. So, sitting with those two things at once is really a test of a lot of things of not practicing attachment, but at the same time, allowing myself to have upset feelings both for what will change in my life and also for what's gonna change for so many people.

What about you? How are you faring? 'Cause this is a lot. This is a lot.

ALICE: It's a lot for so many people, I think. And I am just trying to live like just day by day. I believe, like you, I'm also just very thankful for having a roof over my head and just family with me. And I do have, at the moment, enough supplies. So, I'm just handwashing a bunch and just being as proactive as possible. But I think there are, I think, a lot of mental health issues in terms of just dealing with the anxiety and the uncertainty of this pandemic, and definitely for people with a lot of mental health disabilities, this is gonna be rough. It's gonna be like it's gonna exacerbate a lot of people's conditions. And the fact that maybe they can't see their therapist, or things are disrupted, like you said, about routines. So, I do worry about that for a lot of people.

KELLY: I do, too, and I think we will see after this. And however it ends, we're gonna see a lot more people, I think, discussing mental health more openly than before. Because I think even for people who haven't experienced actual mental illness, they are going to experience what some of those things really feel like and finally be more open to discussing them and to regarding people who really experience these things day in, day out in a different way.

ALICE: Yeah. And my concern is that once things get a little better that, all these non-disabled folks will be like, "Oh! We're back to normal. We're back to our old lives!" And I think the fact that it wasn't normal for us, many of us, to begin with, that this was never like, we've always faced uncertainty and marginalization. And I think this is like, maybe the one hope is that people realize how much privilege they have in thinking about this normalcy that they think that everybody has access to.

[ambient music break with a funky beat]

Anthologies

ALICE: OK. So, we're talking about anthologies today. Before we talk about your new one titled *Body Talk*, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the one you had published in 2018 by Algonquin Young Readers titled *(Don't) Call Me Crazy: 33 Voices Start the Conversation about Mental Health*. First, I wanna find out more about how did the idea for this book come about, and what was the process like getting it published.

KELLY: So, *(Don't) Call Me Crazy* was my second anthology and my second with Algonquin. And the idea really kind of seemed like a natural next step for me. Because as I was editing my first anthology, that's when I really was getting help for my own mental illnesses. And going through that whole process as an adult was fascinating because I had been experiencing

depression and anxiety since I was in high school. But when I was in high school, there wasn't the language for it, and it wasn't easy to discuss or even understand what was off in my head. And so, as I was going through this, I just, I was doing so much reading of other people's experiences and realized that there was very little for teens out there that was non-fiction and talked to them as if it were a conversation, rather than a textbook that helps them either come to understand whatever they're experiencing or talks to them in a very medical type way. There's certainly value in that, but I wanted something where teens could pick up the book and really relate to the pieces. So, that's where it started.

And a lot of my proposal includes a snapshot of sort of what I envision the book to be followed by writing an introduction to the book. The intro doesn't always stay, but it gives sort of the framing for how I'm thinking about the book. And then I always come up with a list of potential contributors, people I would love to have in there. Some of them are going to be like pie in the sky folks who probably would never contribute just because they're so high profile. But then I really focus on ensuring I have as wide a range of voices as possible and to include voices that don't necessarily come from people who are published authors or writers. Because I think that there's real power in seeing that a topic can cross outside of a writer. Because I think it can get too easy to stick to people who do one job talking about this one experience, where something like mental health is, it impacts every person in some capacity. So then, that is sort of where I take these ideas of who I'd like, and then I kind of come up with the table of contents of topics I wanna make sure I hit in the anthology. And then that's pretty much my proposal. My agent will give me some feedback on that and give me ideas and then submits it to my editor to see if they want it.

And the mental health one was an easy sell for them. So, they were really excited, and I felt very supported through the entire process of that book, which was not an easy book to do.

Yeah. And *(Don't) Call Me Crazy* was named a Best Book of 2018 by the *Washington Post*, and it earned a Schneider Family Book Award honor for distinguished representation of a disability experience. And what did it mean to you to have such recognition for this anthology?

KELLY: It meant the world, and it still means the world. I struggled with this book. And part of it was that getting people to talk about mental health was challenging. It's a really sensitive topic, and it's hard to put yourself out there. I anticipated that part. What I didn't anticipate was how challenging it would be to then edit those pieces, to consider these really raw experiences people were sharing, and then as an editor, to talk about how they can make it a better piece or a stronger piece or better hone in on the thing that they're really trying to say. And it was just a struggle to do that. And then it was a struggle to think about how to put them together in the collection and allow each piece to stand on its own and to give a perspective that was individual. I didn't want this to be a collection that was my perspective, because that's one perspective. When you do an anthology, you have the opportunity to offer so many more. And you want to organize it in such a way that it's a conversation, that these pieces are engaging in something bigger than one through line.

[ambient music break with a funky beat]

What's unique about anthologies

ALICE: What do you love about anthologies that's kinda unique from other types of books? Like, what is it that's really special about an anthology for a reader compared to other kind of first-person narratives or just other forms of memoirs and fiction and non-fiction? What do you think is like the gem of an anthology?

KELLY: I think it's the same for me as an editor as it is for readers. And it's that you get so many perspectives on a topic in one place. And my pieces, I purposely have writers keep their pieces short. I give plenty room, where if they're gonna be longer, that's fine. But there's something, I think, really appealing about a book where you look at it, and it's not intimidating because you see that these essays are four, five, six pages long. They aren't that long! And seeing all these different names on them. So, you know you're gonna read so many different perspectives. And yet, if you're a reader, you don't feel like you have to read it cover to cover. You can jump around. You can skip pieces that maybe don't land with you when you read it the first time, and then you can return to it. And suddenly, that piece has a lot more power to it. That, of course, is the reader side.

As an editor, it is so cool to work with so many different people and to have the opportunity to work with writers who haven't been published before. That's, I think, my favorite part. I really love to tell writers, particularly those who haven't published, that what is important is that you have a story, not that you know how to put a sentence grammatically, you know, in a grammatical fashion. Because as an editor, that's my job. And we'll work together to make it a really powerful piece of writing. But you can't have that powerful piece of writing until you have a story. And to see some of these writers go from never having done this before to being really, really proud of this piece they wrote is just so rewarding and fulfilling.

ALICE: Yeah, and I think there's a lot of trust involved with being an editor with the contributor. And what's your approach to working with writers, especially since you're also a writer? I think what are some of the keys to having this kind of relationship? Because there may be times where you may suggest something that they are not supportive of or just have differences. How do you work, communicate, and also just come to some sort of consensus? And just based on mutual trust and respect.

KELLY: Yeah. I really like it 'cause it is. It is about mutual trust and respect. And I tell every writer when I approach them that they can write about whatever they want to. And I think that that is step one for me, is making it clear that they get to be the expert on whatever it is they're writing about. I'm clearly gonna ask them questions as an editor as I'm going through, but they're questions for clarification, not questions of whether I believe them or not. I wouldn't ask them to contribute if I didn't believe them, if I didn't believe they had a story, if I didn't believe they had a perspective that was worth sharing. My second thing is that I let writers work the way that they work. So, some writers send me a perfect draft the first time through, and that's awesome. I have some writers who just send me an outline of what they wanna do, and we work paragraph by paragraph to make it a piece. And I love doing that, too. I've found that letting the writer be the writer and you as an editor saying you're an editor and you're there to work with them however works for them really makes that partnership powerful. Because you're not impressing your ways upon them, but instead, are a resource for them in whatever way they need you to be that resource.

In terms of editing, I always tell the writer they have the right to say no to things. I am very fortunate that I have not had that experience. I've worked with some writers for months back and forth on a piece, and I always think of my role as an editor as somebody who asks questions more than steps in and gives an answer. I think that that really gives the writer power as opposed to putting the power in my hands.

[ambient music break with a funky beat]

Body Talk

ALICE: You know, this August, August 18th of 2020, you have another anthology coming out called *Body talk*. And just to be completely transparent, people are supposed to know that I'm one of the contributors! I have an essay in this collection, so this is completely biased. And I'm super excited about this anthology for a lot of reasons. But tell me about I guess why bodies and what's gonna be like, what was the idea for this anthology that's different and a departure from your other two anthologies?

KELLY: This is a great question. I knew I wanted to do something related to bodies after I did feminism and mental health. I had many, many people ask me to do something. But I wanted to do something with bodies, and I did not want it to be this body positive anthology. I think that that stuff is out there and it has a purpose and it can be done well. What I wanted instead was a book that looked.... I pitched it to my agent, as the puberty book that actually matters, right? Because it's gonna talk about more than reproductive stuff. It's gonna talk about literally all the things that can go on in a body, whether that's physical or political in nature. And trying to distill that into a proposal was probably the hardest part of the anthology process: trying to put words to what I wanted to do so that it's not just labeled this body positive anthology. It's not. Certainly, there's positive stuff in there, but that's not the goal. The goal is instead to give this space for people to talk about their experiences having a body and all the different ways that one can have a body. Because everybody's experience is completely different. And that's what makes it so fascinating, and also, I think, so important to talk about.

The actual putting the anthology together and finding writers and having it, organizing it was surprisingly easy. Everybody who contributed was on board and knew exactly what I wanted to accomplish with this book and brought just incredible pieces to it. I am so excited! I hate saying that one book is my favorite of any of them 'cause they all, I love them all. But this one, something about it, all of the pieces just clicked together really, really well in a way that feels so satisfying!

ALICE: Oh, that's really exciting. And I feel like this is one of the things that's a challenge for an editor, is you have all these different pieces, but grouping them in different ways to really capture the essence. Because there's so many different ways you could organize this table of contents. So, what was that like? Because I think, did it come to you kind of organically, or did you kind of have different drafts or iterations of it?

KELLY: This one was, it actually didn't stray too far from sort of what I envisioned when I wrote the proposal. The pieces within the sections are different. But so, here's an example. I had two pieces that talked about having scoliosis. And they talk about a similar experience, but the tones in them are very different. And they are just very different pieces just by talking about a similar thing. So, in situations like that, I thought way more about the themes in the piece. OK, this one is gonna talk about what growing up with a back brace was like and how that impacted her teen years and then why she has these memories of being in this classroom and this teacher who treated her a certain way because of it. That's such a different set of themes than the piece that talks about having this incredible back surgery to straighten your spine and being really, really funny about this experience. They're two very different feels. And so, I wanted to put them in sections that felt more appropriate capturing that as opposed to pairing them together.

And so, that's sort of my process in it is I wanna look at the big themes in each piece and then also, how does it make you as a reader feel? I want these pieces to play off each other. And I find that it's easier to do that when you parse out funny pieces and enter interweave them with the more serious pieces, so that there's some lightness in the book, too. Because these are

heavy topics. These are really difficult things to talk about or share sometimes. And yet, it almost heightens how powerful they are when it's not just one tough piece after another, but instead tough piece, tough piece, really funny piece that drives all those ideas back home.

[ambient music break with a funky beat]

What Kelly's most looking forward to

ALICE: So, as we wrap up, I wanna ask what are you most looking forward to when your book comes out in August?

KELLY: I love this question. And I love it because with my previous two books, I couldn't know what it was people would be most fascinated with, right? So, with *Body Talk*, I don't know what is going to be the thing. I think it might be—and I guess this is my what I hope it will be—is that this really gives some insight into just how many ways there are to talk about and to think about and to experience having a body. We have these ideas of like what a normal body is, right? But this book is very much about there is no such thing as a normal body. Everybody's body is normal for them. And breaking apart this idea of what the standard body is, I think, is important. And I think too, that people are gonna be surprised that it's not a body positive, love your body, the set, you know, that line. Yes, that comes through periodically, but that is not the driving force behind this book. And to me, that was important from the start. And I hope that readers who pick it up thinking that that's what it's going to be are pleasantly surprised that it's a little bit beyond that.

ALICE: And I think the idea of the word "talk," I think again, just like your previous anthologies, sounds like, it seems to me, one of the purposes of your books are to generate conversation and to have this is a starting point for people to think through things and question things.

KELLY: I hope so. That's always sort of, that's been the goal since day one, is giving a tool that can really engage people in conversation, whether that's internal conversation or a broader conversation. And that's, to bring it back to one of your earlier questions, that's the beauty of an anthology, is you can really spark discussion. Because a good anthology is not going to be one-sided. It's going to have a lot of nuance in it and a lot of different perspectives. And yet they can all exist within the same topic.

ALICE: Well, I couldn't say it any it better.

So, is there anything else you'd like to share? Just as we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to touch on or talk about?

KELLY: I am just.... [sighs] I'm fascinated to see what readers might think of the book in a post-coronavirus world, too. Because I think we're really in this place right now where our bodies are something we are so conscious of, even if that's not necessarily how we're thinking about them, right?

ALICE: Well, especially all the notions of frailty and resilience, which I think they're not mutually exclusive, right? I think right now, people are feeling very vulnerable. And I think a lot of people who probably took their bodies for granted are really getting a little sense of what chronically ill and disabled people have always experienced. So, I feel like there's a lot of, yeah, a lot of thinking about bodies that probably haven't, many people haven't considered.

KELLY: Exactly. And you think too, people who have lived in bodies that have required them to work 10,000 times harder to get even basic respect, you know, like now, that is a more, I don't

wanna say global reality, but more people who haven't had those experiences are suddenly having them. And I can only hope that's going to create better people who better listen to these voices who've been screaming for forever about how terrible our system is, especially in America, for anybody who is not the ideal, who doesn't need accommodations or doesn't need to scream to be heard. And so, my hope is that this will be a wake-up call. It's hard to say. I don't have faith in it changing everything, but I wanna hope that it will. And I wanna hope that people who've been having these experiences since forever, their voices are respected and listened to as the authority, as they should be, in ways that they haven't been before.

ALICE: Well, Kelly, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

KELLY: Thank you so much for having me!

Wrap-up

[hip hop music]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Kelly on my website.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Bye!!!