Episode 124: Interview with Kashana Cauley

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Jennifer Baker: Hey people! Happy new year and thanks so much for coming back and listening to the Minorities in Publishing podcast. For new and returning listeners, you may know that you can find the podcast on minoritiesinpublishing dot tumblr dot com, on Twitter at minoritiesinpub, and wherever you listen to podcasts. The first guest of 2023— God help us. I'm wishing all goodness for all of us, but especially Kashana Cauley, the author of the debut novel *The Survivalists*, which by the time this episode posts will be published by Soft Skull Press, which is a part of Catapult Books. And I really encourage you to get it if you haven't already preordered. She's a writer for *The Great North* [animated series] and former staff writer for *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* and a former contributing opinion writer for *The New York Times*. So, thank you so much for your time, Kashana!

Kashana Cauley: Thanks for having me.

Jennifer Baker: And congrats. You finished the book and got it published. Those are many feats in one.

Kashana: Oh, no kidding. Yeah. For me, it was the end of a 10-year journey, so I'm not taking anything for granted.

Jennifer: And just to give people a sense of the book… *The Survivalist*s is about a young Black woman named Aretha who lives in New York City and practices law, and she goes on to date a young man, also Black, Aaron. And they move in together. *The Survivalists* pertains to everybody. However, it is kind of focused primarily and initially on Aaron's two roommates, Brittany and James, who Aretha becomes entangled with in some ways as she starts to question things in her life. So where did *The Survivalists* percolate from?

Kashana: It started out with a couple of news articles about New York City survivalists. There was one set, a couple in their 20s living in the village, like Ninth between Fifth and Sixth. They were housesitting somebody's house and stockpiling guns. I was like, "Guys, you don't really need to *Bonnie and Clyde* in the Village. So, there's nothing to see here! There's no crime." And then there was another guy who was stockpiling guns at the end of my block and Prospect Heights, on top of like a trendy ramen shop. Again, nothing to fear, no crime, nothing to protect yourself against Prospect Heights wouldn't know what crime was. Yeah, so I did not understand those people and became obsessed with them. But I also grew up in a house where my parents stockpile food, they have a kind of stash. And so, I think when I saw those, those articles, I just started connecting all that. I went, "you know what, I want to write about this weird point of view where you're preparing for things that you don't know what you're preparing for, I just have to do it."

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Jennifer: And it's wild, because it's coming out three years into a pandemic. When I think about survivalists, the first thing that wouldn't come to my mind would be guns. I wouldn't think guns, I would think more about what your parents were doing, which is stockpiling food, getting water, getting batteries, all those things. So it's very interesting where certain mindsets are going especially for these characters of, we need guns, lots of guns. Jumping off from that, where did those characters come from for you in terms of seeing them pretty concretely in the building of this whole novel?

Kashana: I used to live a block from where the book is set on Vanderbilt, this really grand avenue of brownstones and restaurants. After reading about those other folks who were stockpiling guns, I started thinking, "you know, what is the weirdest place that you could maybe be a survivalist in like, the most unexpected place." And I thought the middle of my neighborhood was perfect. It's this sort of like, it's a very laid-back neighborhood. I think of it as just a place where people go out to eat every night and on the weekends, and like stroll up and down Vanderbilt. It's like Sunday, and you're showing off your new clothes and your baby. And it just, it's very cozy and comfortable. It wasn't from like 2013 to 2019 when I lived there, I like putting people in the most possible conflict. I feel like if you just are going to create a character, they should be in a circumstance for the absolute maximum of conflict as possible. And just… This house of people, that peaceful neighborhood this, like, I felt like asking myself, you know, why are they doing this all day long? That's where they came from. Just a desire for that amount of conflict and contrast.

Jennifer: Because also, for a lot of the characters, for Brittany and James… I mean, Aaron seems very evasive there that just to kind of give even more context to the novel for people. I'm saying these names like Aretha is the "outsider"—quote, unquote—from this core trio that is in that survivalist mindset. But Aaron is the guy she starts dating and then she moves in. I feel like that's not a spoiler, it happens less than 80 pages into the book. And then, Brittany and James are also his roommates, but Aaron's doing his coffee thing because he owns a coffee bean repository, or however you call it, and he's going around the world and he's absent for a good amount of his book. And I feel like that's also very representative of his mindset of "I don't see it, I don't have to worry about it until I have to worry about it." So, each of these characters to me kind of really represented a really different perspective: Aretha, who's coming into it, and then will she adapt? How is she reacting to things? Brittany, who seems pretty hardcore into like, we need to be prepared for something. And James who has *a lot* going on. The white dude got a lot going on. Aaron's, like, I'm just gonna do my thing. And it felt like almost a workplace [situation]. I can see each of these characters very clearly and understand where they're coming from, but especially Aretha who is the one we're following for most of this, and I loved your first chapter, because she's like, painstakingly preparing for her first date with Aaron, and decides on gray sweats. Like you, you get what you get, my friend. And I'm like, I feel this deeply in my soul. Might be me next week? I don't know. But there's a lot there in terms of her journey. And I wondered, as I'm flipping the pages and reading, did you know where that was going for her? Did you kind of feel like, "okay, I know where I want Aretha to land by the time you close this book."

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Kashana: No, I just knew that I wanted her to be challenged. I wanted to take a circumstance that was completely contrary to her values, and her acts and deeds up until that point, and I wanted her to be forced to change them in a way that she found uncomfortable and gross. I had no idea where she was going. I would, like, put on her music every day. And I would channel her like I was a medium. And I would just see where the writing took me that day. Somewhere in the middle, after I got a draft done, I forgot a couple drafts done, you know, I saw the arc. And then I started thinking, "oh, this is where I want her to end up." But that first trip through the narrative, maybe two or three trips into the narrative, even I had no idea as she was going. And then even into the editing process, both my agent and my editor suggested things to kind of tweak her arc a little bit and like deepen some of her emotions that she was feeling and what was being expressed on the page. And those things caused me to take her in different directions that I also did not foresee, but ended up laughing.

Jennifer: I had a lot of empathy for Aretha. I mean, again, from the first page, I was just like, yep. And then also just dealing with all this is what you're supposed to do. Right? And that's in terms of survival for Black women, especially. You know, being educated, being professional, what does this look like? What does success look like? What are we supposed to be doing? Are we being rewarded, quote-unquote, for all these things that we're doing? Theoretically that, right? That's a big question for Aretha at her life. And it's interesting, like the turns you made with her of where she went. Because I was like, "Oh, this could have gone a totally different route." of which I'm really tiptoeing around it because I don't want to [spoil anything]. I think I didn't expect it to end where it did. Because I think there's a lot of power in subtleties versus explosions. (Yeah, that makes sense.) So, I really appreciate her going through that journey. I felt like she was simmering a little bit. Did you feel like that for her?

Kashana: Yes, she was simmering.

Jennifer: Do you think that's also because she didn't know how to feel this inability to express this inhibition that maybe has been kind of placed within her? Because you know, when you do things the right way? Again, quote-unquote, how do you react when you decide that that may not be the best way anymore?

Kashana: Oh, very much. So, she's stepping out of the way trying to figure out if the ice is present or not.

Jennifer: True.

Kashana: Like the entire book, every step she takes out onto the lake could be the last one. She feels like she's going beyond her depth at some point. She doesn't know where that's going to be. But at the same time, because she is a person who very much wants to follow rules and has devoted her life to the straight and narrow and all that, she wants to break from that a little bit. I do think you were right. When

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you said something like, as Black women there's so much more pressure for us to do what we're supposed to. And she's dying under that, but she's terrified trying to step off. But at the same time, because she doesn't really have other people in her life, that what you're doing are any examples of what to do. She just she meets this guy, and she's gonna see what's up. And it is scary for her. It's the unknown.

Jennifer: It is really, it's terrifying. And she handles it as well as she can for the most part because, again, we're getting back to kind of that thematic element of survival. I feel like every day, a lot of the time we think about that, and I don't want to put this kind of doomsday narrative on Black women because that's not appropriate or accurate. And at the same time, I really do feel like there's just like constant negotiations happening, which is really greatly reflected in a rebuff, like well, what the hell am I supposed to do now? I guess I just say, "Okay, I'm just gonna be real calm, *real calm* and see how this pans out. And so, you said, *Survivalists* was a 10-year journey in terms of where you started, but you were doing a lot of things over that ten years. So, were you still in law around the time that you were writing or had you stepped out [and been] long into writing by that time?

[10:32]

Kashana: I have stepped out and long gone into writing. I have three drawer books, to be honest, *The Survivalists* didn't take me that long to write. I knew where I wanted to go with that story. I outlined it very well. It came together. And maybe it's six months, I worked on some drafts for like, a couple of years beyond that. But yeah, when I started out I was a lawyer. I have a very supportive husband. He was like, "Hey, do you want to write" and I said, "Yeah, that's always actually been my dream." So, I took myself off the deep end and went for that. Started on short stories, pretended I could write essays for editors, and decided to turn some things in and they went way, way better than I expected. And ended up writing essays to people. Accidentally stumbled into TV via Twitter DMs. And then I started putting together novel because that was my dream the entire time. I just throughout this whole process, I'd put together a novel every couple of years and see if I could finish it. And see if it was in good enough shape to take out two agents, I have one novel or two different versions of it that got represented by two different agents, and neither of them sold it. And so, I went back to the drawing board. And so yeah, this is the culmination of 10 years of that.

Jennifer: I was wondering, especially working in the industry, I think people don't realize that people are working in so many different genres. So even if you take off in one genre doesn't mean that's the genre you want to kind of be in, right? So, I can only imagine maybe you were pursued to do memoirs, or like humor essays or something like that, because of your Twitter presence and all that stuff. And [an editor would] be like, "Can you do some essays" and you'd be like, Well, I have these novels…

Kashana: Every couple of years somebody would approach me about doing a book of humor essays and it's just not my jam. Like I tell you—

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Jennifer: Oh, so definitely, that's a hard no?

Kashana: I think it's really hard to make those work. I actually think that's one of the hardest genres to succeed. And I think it's hard to be that funny. And it's hard to have enough stories in your life that kind of work. I read those and they're tough to get right.

Jennifer: I mean, you could just compile all the tweets. Like archive the tweets and be like there again. Just recycle that get that many tweets. Yeah, that's what I'm we're going downloaded my archive, like three weeks ago, I was like, what's happening? Download? Everyone's been fired. Download it. That's 12 years. I don't know what's there. But damn it, I want it.

Kashana: Mine is blank. I actually tried downloading mine three weeks ago. And they gave me nothing. And I was like, oh, no, no. Like, it's just blank. I haven't like erased that much stuff. They just said there was their data in it for the last 11 years of my life don't exist, other than all the places those have been, like, picked up and syndicated.

Jennifer: Oh, no, someone has to have it. Oh, no.

Kashana: Elon's not handing it over. You know, I'm in jail. I'm jealous of all of you who have a history of your time on Twitter?

Jennifer: I mean, I have a zip file, but I've not opened the zip file. I just backed it up. It was like great. I have it. So theoretically, maybe mine is too. This is a combination of all this work. And then this is the novel that sounds and you go with Soft Skull and your editor is Mensah [Demary]. Yeah, yeah. Mensah is the best was he the editor that got it?

Kashana: He's understood my work since 2015 when he was my editor on Catapult about social class. He generally understands my work. He 100% understood this novel, but I figured I'd have a good shot with him. I specifically was like, I want you to send him this to make sure we have a good, like, repertoire. Like I just yeah, he's edited years of my work. What's your story? All yours were the columns. I love Mensah he gets it.

Jennifer: Oh okay, so that that was just a no brainer that it just worked out really well. And you didn't have to figure that out. That feels very gratifying. I feel like where you don't have to figure each other out as you're getting into your first book coming out in the world. You just have that trust.

Kashana: Oh, yeah, no, he just called me up for the first round of edits. And it was like hey, how you doing? You know, how's your family and then he gave me notes. It's always like that is so relieving to go into this process where you know, it's a debut novelist. I know nothing. Like this is my first rodeo and

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I'm learning all about publishing a book with somebody that I already trust on the editorial side. It just takes so much of the worrying off my plate. It's beautiful.

Jennifer: I really like hearing that, especially in these weird times where people are on strike. Who knows what's going on? There's so much secrecy in the business. And that trust is really imperative I feel like, because as authors you're being asked to not just create. Then there's the vulnerability of going out and talking about this ad nauseam potentially. And I think it's really helpful then just to know that everyone's looking out for you. Which I feel like people are for the most part, but there's just something different when you have, like you said, that rapport from before where we just know each other, we just trust each other. And shouts to Soft Skull for sending out your book with some coffee. Oh, yeah, you're sending out with some coffee because I was like, Wait, why am I getting coffee?

Kashana: Oh, they sent me one of those too. I was so attached. Like my publicist, who put together the coffee, she had a really lovely Black-owned roaster that she was into, and she's like, give this a shot. And it was so yummy. And I just thought it was really nice. Because, yeah, the coffee roasting is a pretty significant tack in the book. But yeah, it is kind of an unexpected gift. I love how they did that.

Jennifer: Yeah, yeah. I'm glad they're keeping it black. Get on y'all.

Kashana: Oh, me, too.

Jennifer: I appreciate that. This doesn't need to be said. black owned stuff. So at the end of the day, how are you feeling? As of when we're talking? Your book is coming out in four days…

Kashana: That is really overwhelming to me. I, on some level, did not I guess it's gonna happen after three dead books and like three other careers. I just… I am a writer. I just thought I would be a writer in other ways. And the book. I mean, so many people seem to like it already, which is awesome. I hear something from like, yeah, there's a lot of press. I got a great *New York Times* review the other day. Well, I'm,

Jennifer: I'm… My "really?" is more like, you seem surprised that people like not that you got good press, sorry.

Kashana: There's a lot of novels in general, there's a lot of books being published. I feel like it's hard to, you know, necessarily get folks to be aware of your book, much less decided that they like it.

Jennifer: I want to give another shout out to the publicity team. So Selijah. They had ARCs early, like I was hearing about your book for a bit. So, I think they also really were great about not just getting the coffee and getting all those things and making sure we knew your book was coming out well, before I

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think it was February or March of last year that I first heard: Oh, we have arcs available. And I'm like, get the hell out of here.

Kashana: [I didn't know that] people do that either? And I was amazed. Yeah. And there was a great reaction to those. And I just felt like we were very together as a team from the beginning. Because of that, in a way.

Jennifer: Yeah. Yeah. So I hope you feel continually taken care of as you launch into this amazing debut year and get this started out. So, is it kind of refreshing to be able to start it out at the beginning of the year?

Kashana: Yes. Now that I kind of see a little bit more about how books work, I think it would be tougher to be in June, your first time around or whatever. Just yeah, you know, it's 2023. And all of a sudden, it's like it's the 2023 books, and it's really nice to be up there at the top of the year with the other top of the year books. I'm not very patient.

Jennifer: So, with the other novels and all that shows patience to just keep committing to writing them, and then doing it again and doing it again.

Kashana: Yeah, but I think I launched so many other careers that I just kind of got into to pass the time that I feel sort of impatient. And I did so much writing for all of those. That was how I actually did my impatience part. That's how I exercise patience. Other writing.

Jennifer: Okay, so… would that be a level of advice you'd give to writers in terms of so many of us are juggling other things because rent, mortgage, healthcare, all these things. But you launched like you said, other careers over time, but you were still writing these novels. And you were still pursuing being a published author in this way. Of course, like you said, you you've been it all, you've been a writer this whole time. So is that kind of what helped you just propel to just keep going? And not really ever see the books is something that wouldn't happen, but just like, "Okay, well, maybe it's just a different medium. And then I come back to books." Or you're doing these things simultaneously?

Kashana: Very much so I did those things simultaneously. If a book got rejected, I would tell myself that I could do other projects. It helped me to take time off between individual drawer books to do something else and come back and feel refreshed. When I wanted to write another book for me, it helps get rid of some of those fear of failures, you know? Where I could be rejected doing four types of things instead of one, but also get accepted more often? So, I was constantly getting positive feedback about my writing, even if it wasn't the novels and I think that helped a lot.

Jennifer: It sounds like you're really dedicated to your craft, you are dedicated to producing, you are dedicated to putting something on the page. That's what it sounds like.

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Kashana: Yes, but also making sure that it's done in the proper voice. I want everything to sound like me. I have tried to fight for that across mediums. Yeah, I want everything to be an extension of how I feel on the page. And how I feel in my head.

[20:08]

Jennifer: Do you think you'll ever go back to the other ones after some distance and come back to those?

Kashana: What's funny is one of the drawer books is a novel about gun dealing in Chicago under different circumstances that has an absolute ton of gun research. As well as, like, despair about being unemployed, and like wondering if that was the only way somebody could make money that is very much like all the research of that the best parts of that are in this book. So, I did go back to that when I go, you know, I know some of the stuff about some of this world. I spent eight years on a book about musicians that is probably dead. I love them, I think I was saying something about, like the history of Black people in rock music and like how that would carry through into the present and whatnot. But, I also think it's hard to write about music, because if nobody's going to hear the music, it's hard to get across on the page when it was sound like and so it's hard to connect to. There's a great book, *The Last Revival of Opal and Nev* by Dawnie Walton. She does a good job of that I can hear her music, I can see those performances, I can see the artists in *Opal and Nev* in her book. But that's hard. And I don't think I did it. As long as she does. Everybody should read that. Yes. I read that book through three times when I got it. And the first time around, I was just like, "oh, man, we're really modeling it on Altamont?" And then I got past the Altamont stuff. And I was like, "Okay, this isn't just a book about the 70s. Like, she's really got these great characters, and they're unique, and they're original, and they're hers." And then, I was three-quarters of the way through and she without spoiling for folks who haven't read that one just drops the name of their big song that they're doing, and it's like, gotten expletive in it. And they've got this absolutely crazy performance that they do that is kind of like all over the place and a little bit violent. And I'm like, "oh, man, this is… I can feel these shows that don't exist. I can. I felt like I attended the concerts in her book."

Jennifer: Oh, fantastic. I have it and at all of this cast, and Dawnie is just the sweetest human. And so, I'm sure she'll be very happy to hear with *The Survivalists* coming out in terms of the conversation you will be having with people, readers for virtual events, and all these things. Is there any kind of big takeaway or something you're looking forward to discussing with people about *The Survivalists* at large?

Kashana: I tend to think that when books are in the world, they have very little to do with their authors. And they've already been thrilled at the broad swath of opinions and tastes that people have brought to the book that I would never have considered when I wrote it. So, I'm just gonna leave that up to them. I

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just hope people enjoy it. I'm doing entertain. That was literally all I want to accomplish that I would talk about in that atmosphere

Jennifer: I have healing feelings, but I appreciated where everything ended up. Thank you so much, because shout out for taking your time to talk to me. We know you're very present on the social media. Would you like to lay down your handles on where you're most active, where you're open to hear people's positive thoughts on *Survivalists*?

Kashana: I am really a Twitter person. I am also @kashanacauley on Twitter, no space, just one big word. I am trying to get to use Instagram, but I'm sort of terrible at it. I don't really have a lifestyle I think people have lifestyles are better at it. You know, like, if you have a yacht to pose on it works a little better. So gotta find a yacht next year new year's resolution so I can be better and so—

Jennifer: Can you screen grab the tweets to Insta? Could that just be an extension?

Kashana: And it worked very well for her. I just don't know that. I'm that sort of person. But if Twitter seems like it's gonna be funky, you know, maybe I'll reconsider.

Jennifer: And so that's K-A-S-H-A-N-A C-A-U-L-E-Y. Yeah, for and again *The Survivalists* is out January 10th. Happy New Year y'all! Get it from Soft Skull encouraging you to get it from your indies because we love it indie bookstore, especially a BIPOC-owned indie bookstore, but you know, get it wherever you can, eBook audio, all that good stuff. It's a really intriguing read. And I can't wait for us to have some online book club discussions about it. Because you know what's happening because what this app is like, who finished it? We gotta talk about this this Aaron, because I just find them really suspicious, Kashana. I'm sorry. I was suspicious of him the whole time.

Kashana: Oh yeah. I mean, like, he just did not do anything. Like he just disappears in a weird time. Like, it's like, what do you do and all that like, you know, attraction, you know, we love each other. And then why are we disappearing? Like, what's up with that?

Jennifer: Right, right. Are you mad chill? Why are you that chill? That's way too chill.

Kashana: Everything is going on in your house and your life. Yeah.

Jennifer: Yeah. I was like, Naw, I get it though I get it Aretha, but something's there. Thank you again for being on. And thank you for this book. Major congrats. So happy for you. I'm so happy that you're in a space with Soft Skull that's been treating you read it very well.

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Kashana: Thank you so much. I'm glad you're connected to the book. You know, it's been a dream of mine to meet people like you read my book and, like, connect to it. And I think we had a really good conversation about it. I think you brought up a lot of good points. So, it's really been a pleasure.

Jennifer: Oh, thank you. And thank you all for listening. Once again. You can find the podcast on Twitter, Tumblr, and wherever you listen to podcast. Take care.

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