

Season One, Episode Two: The Craft of Suspense with Aliah Wright, debut author of *Now You Owe Me*

Intro: Welcome to Red Hen Radio, a podcast brought to you by Red Hen Press. We're a nonprofit publisher fostering diverse stories every year. On this podcast, you'll get to hear from the people who are inside the literary world — the authors and publishing professionals who are working hard to keep independent literature thriving. Stay with us as we introduce you to today's segment.

Kate: Well, good morning, Aliah. I think it's morning for me, and it's afternoon for you.

Aliah: Yes (laughs). How are you?

K: Very good. It's just great to be here with you, talking about your book, *Now You Owe Me*, and it's been exciting to watch your journey of getting your book out into the world which is such an amazing story and I can't wait to hear all the responses you're going to get for this book.

A: Me too. (laughs) I'm super excited!

K: One of my questions about this— I always am curious when writers were getting ready to write a book, what they had in mind. I think back to even, you know, when I was first reading Kafka. Was he thinking about a great bug story, or was he thinking about that amazing story that's underneath the bug story? Which is, of course, a story about alienation. And your story, you know, obviously, could easily be read as a great thriller. But there is this other story underneath that has to do with race and with privilege, and from my perspective, perhaps some of the effects of a little too much Christianity. And so, I'm curious, sort of, what came first when you were working on this book. Maybe the great thriller, that this book is, or all the amazing threads that you've got underneath, which to me has to do with what I think of as all the odd darkneses that are this great country of America.

A: Wow. (laughs) That's a lot. *Now You Owe Me* grew out of my desire to write a story that ended in a way that was different from what we see in the news when these women go missing. And I began to write it as a short story in 2016, and I left it there.

And I was working on some other things, and then I decided, you know, let me see if I can turn this into a novel. And out of that grew the characters of Ben and Corinthia. And I said to myself: *Well, what if, you know, instead of there being one serial killer, what if there's two? (gasp) Wait a minute. What if they're related to each other? What if they're twins? What if they're, you know, a boy and a girl?* And then I decided to tell the story from their perspective. And so that's how that came about.

And then the Amanda character, who is the heroine, actually came last. So for me, I knew that the story was going to be about Fiona, who is one of the main characters who gets kidnapped. And I knew that she was going to be rescued. So I just wanted to make sure that I had a story

that I could tell that reflected what women go through when things like this happen. But I wanted to have a...there's a bunch of twists in the story. I wasn't thinking about the larger societal issues until I got to certain sections of the book and what it was like from a perspective of being a black person, because I am a black person— what that looks like from a character who is African American and what the implications are.

So for two characters who are African American to be called to the police station: what that might feel like for them, you know, a little bit of unease, a little bit of wariness because of all the societal things that happen to black people who are in different situations.

K: Yeah. I find it so interesting that Amanda was a later character for you because she feels so central to the book. But Ben and Corinthia are so well written and, you know, feel so familiar to me having come out of a sort of Christian background myself. And one of the things that you do so well there is that, sort of, a kind of obsession and madness that really takes hold when it's collective. And so in that family, the obsession is shared, and therefore, becomes much stronger. So once you started working with this character of Amanda, who did you want her to be in the world?

A: So when I was writing Amanda, I have, like, a poster board in front of me when I write. And so at one point, I had Amanda must be a badass. Amanda must save herself. Amanda must be this person who is tenacious. She's brave. She's courageous. She is, you know, takes no prisoners. She's the kind of person, that if she were your best friend, she would be that person who would look out for you.

And so when I was writing her, I wanted to make sure...and I had to actually keep in my mind that this is a person who doesn't need someone to rescue her. She's the rescuer, and we will see that as the book moves forward. In many ways, she reminds me of myself (laughs), although I don't think I would be as brave as she is. And she makes a lot of mistakes because of her tenaciousness and a little bit because she has a need to control. She's not the person who will sit by and let the police do their jobs. She has to figure out if there's a way that they can do their jobs better.

And so that is sort of what happens as we see her progress through the book.

K: Yeah. She's your ride or die. And it's interesting...

A: Exactly.

K:Right. It's interesting that we're used to accepting that there's this sort of Jack Reacher kind of character who doesn't trust the police and is gonna go rescue somebody. But for this person to be a black woman who doesn't trust the police...and, obviously, why would a black person trust the police? There's just no paradigm in our culture. Her not trusting the police absolutely makes sense, but she decides to go and do what actually is their job. She's obviously got an amazing

amount of courage. And so, yeah, you've built the character that you wanted to build, but she's out there on an edge. And, obviously, that's what takes her over the edge a bit, one might say.

Let's go back to the twins. We joked about them being the Lannisters, at the press a bit, because they felt a little Lannister like. Can you tell us a little bit about writing those twins?

A: I'm trying not to give too much of the book away (laughs). So when I talk to people about the dynamics between all four of these characters— between Amanda and Fiona and Ben and Corinthia— one of the main things that they all have in common is that they love each other. With the girls, with Amanda and Fiona, it's a friendship, and they've grown very close because of their backgrounds.

But with Ben and Corinthia, they consider each other soulmates. And because they're very close to each other— because they're twins and they grew up together— they shared everything together. And so Ben is deeply, deeply committed to his sister, almost to the point of near obsession. Corinthia also has this need, this drive, to rescue him and to keep him safe. Ben would do anything for his sister, and she would do anything for him.

You don't see them interacting very much on their own individually. Mhmm. They're together all the time. They feed off of one another.

K: Do you think that that can be something that happens when kids come from a troubled home and they, sort of, become a sort of entity up to themselves where it's like we have to we have to protect each other?

A: It's almost like the book *Flowers in the Attic* where the kids are just together all the time, and they're dependent on one another all the time with the exception there's nothing in the book that's sexual between the two of them at all. But there's this dependence on each other because they're so close to each other, because they grew up like this; It was just the 2 of them fending for themselves, each defending the other against their mother, and that never changes even as they get grown.

K: I've always thought that was sort of the one of the things that doesn't get talked about with kids of divorces. You know, my kids used to say, "we carry our secrets house to house." I used to think, *wow*, that's a lot of drama. Especially since I got along really well with their dad. It was two miles away. But still, I do think that there was a certain feeling that, you know, we're the only stability, like, we're always together. And that came back to me when I read this.

So when you thought about this, did you think of Ben and Corinthia as sort of villains in the story? I think serial killers are often thought of as villains.

A: Yeah. For me, you know, I have a split in my head because sometimes I think of him as completely and totally the villain— that he is this person who absolutely is guilty of all these things.

But then on the other hand, what I was trying to do was show you the evolution of how they became the way that they did. What makes a person become this way? Is it nature? Is it nurture? Is it the way that they've been brought up? Is it their circumstance?

And so that's why I got into *here they are as 7 years old, and this is the thing that sets them off.* Also, what sets them off too is they have two parents who are not the best parents in the world. I wasn't trying to think of, you know, the reader having empathy for them at all as much as I was thinking of showing you why they are the way that they are.

K: Tell us about the character Ben. He's sort of an elusive character in the book.

A: So Ben is the younger twin. Corinthia is older. She's the person that he listens to all the time. She bullies him.

He has this compulsion, this need. He defers to Corinthia on almost everything, and he admires and reveres her.

K: He doesn't have a complete will of his own.

A: Exactly.

K: Right. Right.

A: And she's sort of steering the boat even as he's doing the things that he wants to do, but she's the person that's guiding him.

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K: So you are working on another book or books?

A: I am finishing the second book and then I've outlined book three. So in book two because I'm looking at the reviews online and the reviews on Goodreads are amazing, I'm so appreciative of people who have gone on there and have liked the book so much. And people are like, "well, what happens at the end of book one?" And I feel like book two picks right up where book one leaves off. And so we see exactly what happens, and I loved it. I loved writing that.

And I'm working on making sure that I satisfy the story to the point where we have a resolution.

K: So you feel like it's going to solidly be three books?

A: So I do feel like it's gonna be solidly three books, and I know that the third book introduces a brand new character that I believe people will love. Sometimes when you read sequels, it seems

like it's the same book as the first one, but in different circumstances. And this is completely different from that.

So book two is more cat and mouse thriller... people die; it's still about the serial killers. But it's much more than that.

K: One one of the things that seemed to me with Amanda and Fiona that you're interested in is this whole idea of a sort of sisterhood. And I think my favorite writer is still Toni Morrison. But at the end of *Beloved*, the group of women are the ones who exorcise the ghost of slavery that's that's living with Sethe, and that's how Sethe is able to have a family. And it seems to me that you're working on that whole idea of the way that Amanda is able to sort of function in the world is by having a sisterhood. Was that something you thought about?

A: You know, for me, we see so many books and so many films where we talk about people who are in relationships, but we don't talk about the friendships between women. And these two girls have a lot in common. They're both only children. They both grew up kind of sheltered, but Amanda has this thing where she really depended on her parents a lot to shape the person she is. She didn't even get to go to the school she wanted to go to. She's at this school where Fiona is because that's where her parents wanted. She wanted to go to school in New York, but she's always been this person who's done whatever her parents have told her to do. But that changes when she meets Fiona. She grows love as a sister, and she's never had that before. Never had a best friend before until she got to college. And I think that could be true for a great many people. They don't really come out of their shells until they're on their own. Fiona says, "you know what? You don't have to do what your parents tell you to do. You're an adult. You can do what you wanna do." And for her, it's like the light bulb goes off and she begins to realize, "you know, yeah. I'm gonna do the things that I wanna do. It's okay for me to hang up on my parents. It's okay for me to not answer the phone. It's okay for me to do the things that I wanna do and the things I wanna engage in and to be my own person." And she begins to realize that, "you know, this is a relationship that I'm gonna have for the rest of my life. I can't imagine a world where my very best friend is missing. Oh my god. I have to do something." So that's what drives Amanda to wanna do something and rescue Fiona or at least help the police with their investigation. And because she has this need, this controlling need, to actually be in the middle of things and figure out things, she becomes this investigator on her own. The other thing too is for Amanda, it's guilt because the day that Fiona goes missing is also the same day that Fiona said to her, "hey, you wanna come with me to this party?" And she's like, "no, I'm not gonna go." And so she feels, you know, a little bit of responsibility because she feels like "if I had just been with her, this wouldn't have happened." That's what, I think, that's what's driving her, and that's what the friendship is so important to her because she can't imagine not having this woman in her life.

K: So you've built up this whole sisterhood is key to building a solid life. I love that.

I feel like some of us discover that later than others that having a solid tribe is what makes decision making and a fun life.

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K: One of the things you and I have talked about a lot, maybe the thing that struck me when I read through the first draft was, the whole idea of how we experience danger in the world.

I think I told you that my son backpacked around the world for a few years, and I kept thinking about the fact that, you know, my daughter probably couldn't have done that, given how women experience danger versus how men experience danger.

So if you're a woman, you're walking down the street at two in the morning, and you hear footsteps, you are grabbing your keys. If you've got mace, you're grabbing that, but you're definitely feeling your adrenaline pumping.

But if you're a man, you might be anxious, but not in the same way. And in your story, the question is, how is that feeling different if you're a black woman? And you work that into your story so skillfully because you put us inside Amanda, and Amanda is definitely going to feel more anxious. And it is because of that anxiety, though, that she's able to figure out who the killer is when she's in the bar in a way that the police people did not figure it out because she senses danger differently. I felt like that was such an important part of the whole writing of the book.

A: For me, initially, as a person of color, if I'm walking down the street or if I'm in a situation where Amanda is doing something that could be perceived as dangerous or not right, when she goes through this part in the book where she's peeping through windows in a really nice neighborhood, and in the back of her mind, I think this is for for a number of us, people of color, and I can't speak for everybody. But in the back of my mind and in the back of her mind, she's like, "if the police see me doing this because I'm black, something bad could happen." There is a light bulb that goes off if something happens where you begin to immediately realize "I can't do the things that other people can do."

It's like the conversation that almost every black parent has with their children when they're out in the world. It's the one I had with my son. When you encounter the police and they pull you over, both hands on the steering wheel where they can see you and you answer their questions. Don't get smart. Just answer their questions. If they ask you for identification, give them advance notice that you're gonna reach for the identification. We have to be cognizant that this person is not going to approach us the same way that they would other people because they're afraid of us, even though we've not given them any reason to be afraid.

I tried to convey that because there have been far too many young African American men and women and children who have lost their lives because a police officer was afraid. That's something that, you know, we have to be cognizant of all the time when you're going into situations where you have to always be mindful. You could be the sweetest person in the world. In my head, I'm thinking of different names of people who have actually lost their lives because

they were simply just walking down the street and the police officer saw black first and they didn't see anything else except that color and they immediately felt threatened and that person lost their life. When you live in that kind of world, that is something that is a truth.

But the book is so much more than just about race. That's a small part of the book, but it has to be an essential part of the book because it's something that cannot be ignored because Amanda's black all day every day just like I am. She grew up affluent in a neighborhood. Both of her parents are doctors. She had all the advantages a person can have, but at the same time, people don't see that. That's something that you carry with you in almost every encounter every day.

K: I think when you and I were talking about it, I mentioned that in an interview with Obama when Obama was running for president, someone was asking Michelle if she was worried about him getting shot, and she said, "he's a black man in America. I'm worried when he goes for gas." Again, obviously, the Obamas were affluent living in Chicago, but it wasn't a matter of that. It's just a matter of skin color.

And so I felt like that wasn't the main thrust of this book, but you had that as a thread that went all the way through. Right. You know, very well done. And so when I got to that part, I just couldn't stop thinking about it.

So when you were getting to the ending of the book, did you struggle with the ending? Did that come easily? You've got this nice cliffhanger at the ending that everybody's gonna look forward to. Was that challenging to get to?

A: Not really (laughs). For me, it was a matter of I wanted the reader not to be dissatisfied.

I thought about how am I going to end this without going into what comes next. It was probably the second favorite part of the book for me was to write all the things that happened to the twins in the resolution portion of the book. I tried to figure out a way to make it more thrilling, but I think I acquitted myself pretty well (laughs) throughout the book with all the twists.

K: Right.

A: For me, it's because of my background being an entertainment editor for a decade and just seeing so many films and reading so many books and seeing so many television shows and having things be predictable— I'm not a person who's a fan of the predictable.

So I wanted to give the readers something where they could say, "wow. That never even ran across my mind."

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K: So I know you've been, because you are into digital media, I know you've been working very hard on TikTok. You're storming the followers and so on. So I'm curious, given your expertise around all of this— I know you're a journalist— what you have planned for the book. The world is changing in terms of what happens to promote a book. It's not that it's gotten trickier. It's just that the game has changed. And so now we think of podcast tours, TikTok, social media, and then a sprinkling of events. So what do you have planned for *Now You Owe Me* yourself?

A: I haven't done any long form pitching yet.

K: Okay.

A: However, I am going to New York next week to do an interview with *The Root* on camera. So they're going to do a couple of videos, and we're gonna talk about the craft of writing, and then I'm also gonna talk about the book. And then I have three more book signings lined up, and I was at New Voices New Rooms, which was another American Booksellers Association conference.

I would love to plan a book club where I'm actually talking to some readers who have read the book. I'm trying to plan one in Canada, actually. So I'm hoping that that one comes through. I'm just taking it all in as it comes. Definitely doing more TikToks about the book and about the craft of writing.

One of the things that I've gotten a lot of feedback on from a number of people— and this is not just people who are writers or aspiring writers, just regular folks on TikTok— is just the process of being dedicated and focused when you want to achieve a goal. Because we all have different goals in life in terms of where we wanna go and what we wanna do, but a lot of it, just like writing, is making sure that you're taking the time to spend in your craft, dedicating time to whatever endeavor that you're interested in. You have to actually spend time doing that and to get people to focus and zoom in on what's really important for them and to be able to inspire them is important to me.

K: Well, so for any of our listeners who are writers themselves and thinking, *how do you guys promote a book over there at Red Hen?* You can hear that she's got some events lined up. Some of them we worked with her on. Some she set up herself. And she's been doing TikTok. When did you launch this TikTok? It seems like it's been about a year.

A: It's been about, I think, a year, and I went kicking and screaming. I did not wanna do this, Kate. I did not wanna do this. And then a friend convinced me. And then, another friend, I saw him do it, and he wrote a YA book that he self published, and it went right up the charts.

And I was like, maybe I should try to do this thing. So I said, "okay." And they were like, "you're really good at giving advice. Just just do it." And I said, "alright, I'll do it." Because for me, I remember being eighteen and going to college and being incredibly shy, not wanting to talk to people. And that's hard when you're a journalist because you have to talk to people. You have to

come outside your shell. And there are a lot of writers. All they wanna do is sit in the dark, just the glow of their computer screen, and write. And they don't want the attention. And there are many who have been able to do that and become New York Times best selling authors. And my personality, I think, it helps me fit into being able to be on TikTok and talk to people and just being real and just having a conversation and saying, "Hey, try this. Hey, try that. This is what I did, it may or may not work for you." That was one of the things that I tried. It's one of the things I still try to convey. I just did a TikTok last night where I'm talking about, you know, how to ratchet up suspense when you're writing. So it's like just me, like, trying to convey some of the lessons that I've learned and hoping that it helps people.

K: Right. Right. So, again, what you're thinking of, you know, when you're getting a book out there is how to move the needle. You want people to go to their local bookstore and say, "hey, where's Aliah Wright's book? *Now You Owe Me*," and get the books on the shelf. You want them to order it from Bookshop.org or Powells.com or Barnes & Noble. You want to get the book in readers' hands. So I think the TikTok helps, podcasts helps. I did a lot of podcasts for my novel this spring, and we always have lists of podcasts. And then, of course, you heard Aliah mention, doing what we call long read pitches. Her interview with *The Root* is obviously fantastic.

Aliah might come up with some op ed pieces. And so Aliah has so many things you've heard in this podcast so far that would create some energy. And we've had the most luck in terms of selling books with journalists, Kristen Millares Young being the queen of this, an award winning journalist on the author of *Subduction*. And so I feel confident that you could come up with some articles that you could pitch out there. The piece that sold more of my books than anything else was the op ed piece in the *LA Times*.

And so the byline of course is Aliah Wright, author of *Now You Owe Me*, you know, obviously really, really helps. And so I want everyone who's listening to think that I think there's a myth out there that people aren't reading as much. And the fact is people are reading a lot. And books are selling. Our author, Percival Everett, out there with *James*. And then our small book *Sonnets* is just flying off the shelves. And it's just a small book of poetry, but it's kind of riding the tale of *James*. And this book, *Now You Owe Me*, there's already enormous excitement about. And I think part of it is that when it comes to good literature, people get excited and want to buy those books. Aliah, you'll be pleased to hear that *A Punishing Breed* is selling extremely well.

A: That's great.

K: I also wanna say that Aliah's book got a great review in *Library Journal*, and so we know it's getting great sales from libraries. Aliah, it's been so great to see you again. And I'll be happy to see you.

A: Thank you so much.

K: On behalf of the whole team, you've been just such a joy to work with. We're so glad to have you as part of the Red Hen family, and we're looking forward to seeing that second book.

A: Thank you. I'm looking forward to finishing it.

K: And thank you so much for having time for this podcast.

A: This was a wonderful, wonderful, interview, and I really appreciate it. And if you're listening, please go out and get a copy of *Now You Owe Me* wherever books are sold, but especially at a discount from Bookshop.org.

K: Thank you so much.

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