



Book Gang Podcast Transcript:

Kayla Rae Whitaker (00:00)

I'm Kayla Rae Whitaker and I am the author of Returns and Exchanges.

Amy's Warm Intro:

Hey, Book Gang! Nearly a decade has passed since Whitaker wrote her inventive debut, *The Animators*, which detailed a female partnership in animation that mesmerized me much like *Tomorrow*, and *Tomorrow*, and *Tomorrow*.

Today, this gifted writer and English teacher joins us to discuss her riveting new family saga, *Returns & Exchanges*. Whitaker's sophomore novel takes an unexpected turn, centering on a family who finds fame and fortune by launching their own department store chain in the 1980s. The cozy shop—filled with Norman Rockwell holiday dish sets, Isotoner driving gloves, Cannon bath towels, and Atari gaming systems—unlocks vivid Gen-X memories for me as the couple's messy family dynamics play out in surprising ways.

At the story's opening, we meet Fred and Fran, the proud parents of four children. Fran's evolution into the face of their brand in commercials, with her charisma and smoking

good looks, draws in their customers but also attracts public scrutiny. Fred, on the other hand, finds focus in acquisition to obsessive levels in building his chain, but more importantly, his wealth and social status in town, while struggling with crippling anxiety attacks.

But everything changes when Fran develops feelings for a female employee, and Fred becomes involved with The Order of the Southern Star—a brotherhood founded just after the Civil War on so-called Christian values.

Across four hundred pages, Whitaker pulls us into the couple's chaos, following their children as they each navigate unaddressed needs while the store takes center stage in the family's life.

What stands out in Whitaker's books is her impeccable research and immersive scene-setting, and this novel is no exception. Every passage pulls you into the world, sentence by sentence. For example, describing Fred: *"This Fred shined under the gaze of others; years of talking to customers had given way to a higher form of crowd work. During weekend golf dates with his Southern Star buddies, he'd apparently developed a reputation for being the comedian, a cornpone sage with Don Rickles incisors. He'd begun to crib lines from films, affect a drawl likewise ganked from John Wayne. 'I'd like to take his measure,' he said with cool skepticism about a new neighbor. An airy 'I kindly doubt it' in response to Fran's suggestion that they bump floor manager wages."*

Whitaker's specificity is so satisfying you'll find yourself looking up each and every detail. This is a book to savor—though I admittedly tore through it in a single sitting!

While this novel is rooted in a specific era, its themes resonate in our modern lives—especially the polarizing divisions that can shape small towns and how scrutiny grows when someone, as my grandparents would say, gets "too big for their britches." I loved every minute with this family, and I think you will too. I'm delighted to introduce one of my favorite books of 2026—and perhaps your next favorite storyteller, Kayla Rae Whitaker.

If you're new here, hi! I'm Amy Allen Clark, the voice behind the Book Gang podcast, and I'm so happy to have you. This show celebrates debuts, backlist favorites, and under-the-radar book gems. It's an absolute joy to take you on a full immersion into our 2026 Summer Reading Guide as we celebrate some of my favorite authors we have featured inside. In case you missed it, we have three incredible episodes to indulge in right now: Laurie Frankel for *Enormous Wings*, Christina Baker Kline for *The Foursome*, and Sarah Damoff for *The Burning Side*, which came to store shelves on Tuesday.

I want to thank so many of you who have sent sincerely some of the kindest, most heartfelt messages about discovering the show through the guide and the choices I make to champion voices you would not have discovered otherwise. The annual guide is

available for purchase, offering a handpicked collection of 70 carefully selected titles—upcoming releases, buzzy debuts, and new-to-me backlist treasures—across 57 pages designed to help you build your perfect summer stack. You will receive it as an instant download for \$7, and that purchase allows us to keep our lights on at Book Gang. We use these funds to invest in the virtual studio space, high-quality recording equipment, and to hire someone to help me edit each episode for you, so you get a highly polished hour without commercials. Thank you to every reader and listener who took the plunge with me this year and for the joy you have shared over these new literary discoveries.

This is my final reminder that our May book club selection is Janelle Brown's riveting literary thriller, *What Kind of Paradise*. We will gather on May 28th (next Thursday) at 8 PM ET for our Zoom deep dive, and don't miss Janelle's guest appearance on the Book Gang podcast—linked in the show notes—where she shares behind-the-scenes insights into her writing journey and the inspiration for this page-turner.

In case you missed it, *What Kind of Paradise* centers on Jane, a young woman raised off the grid by her elusive father. As Jane nears adulthood, a startling revelation shakes the foundation of everything she's believed, sending her on a search for answers far from Montana. This month's pick is tailor-made for fans of atmospheric suspense and emotionally layered family stories. I'm thrilled to welcome so many new members—can't wait for you to join our warm multigenerational club! Membership is just \$5 a month, with a 10% discount if you sign up for a year.

For every podcast show, I make a fun, immersive book list to browse, and in honor of *Returns & Exchanges*, I'm sharing our new book list: *22 Page-Turning Books About Malls and Retail Stores*. It was so fun to dig into my reading history and pull out so many book gems where their retail space became the setup for an incredible story. Whether we are waiting out a zombie apocalypse in an abandoned mall, catching feels at a hardware store, discovering secrets tucked inside a vintage clothing collection, or watching a real-life celebrity curate 2000s styles for retail chain glory, there is something for everyone today. Patrons can download a printable checklist and join us for a spoiler-filled chat with Kayla, where we dig into the book's second half and our nostalgic obsession with retail chains gone by.

Now, let's meet this week's special guest: Kayla Rae Whitaker. Kayla's work has been published in *The Los Angeles Times*, BuzzFeed, *Electric Literature*, and others. Her first novel, *The Animators*, was named a best book of 2017 by *Entertainment Weekly*, NPR, Kirkus, and BookPage. Her second novel, *Returns and Exchanges*, published by Random House, is on store shelves now. Kayla is a graduate of the University of Kentucky and New York University. She writes and teaches in Queens, New York and it is a joy to celebrate her work on Book Gang today.

If you enjoy the show, please consider leaving a review on iTunes—it's a quick, free way to support what we do. And to our patrons who keep the lights on at Book Gang: I am sending you the sparkliest marker and a JCPenney Wish Book to circle everything your inner child desires today. You deserve it! Thank you for supporting human creativity. Now let's get chatting!

(transition music)

Amy Clark (00:06)

Well, Kayla, I have already told you this without recording, but I'm obsessed with you and this is going to be a big fangirl episode. You wrote The Animators. I've been waiting with baited breath for another book and this book surprised me. You just have such a knack for partnerships that are kind of unusual and different in business. I know this is revisiting some themes.

For my icebreaker, I wanted to know because we are doing a family business today in this book. Did you ever work for a family business?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (00:42)

worked for a couple. Yeah, I've had a lot of jobs in my life. So I started working when I was really young. I worked at a call center that was owned by a family. I think I worked at a restaurant that was owned by a family. We do not do that. My folks did not have a business. So this was always something that was, I was kind of on the outside looking in. It feels like all of my books sort of start that way. Like I have my nose pressed up to the glass to try to figure out what this other experience is like. So I guess the closest thing that I have personally, I'm a writer, it's one of my jobs now. that's kind of, it's, sometimes I wish for a partner. I'm in this, it's, I'm in this solo. But yeah, I think it started from a point of fascination, you know, just what is this experience like?

Amy Clark (01:33)

Yeah, I can tell you working for a family business, there's a lot of dysfunction that goes on behind the scenes. I feel like all of my jobs that I had pretty much except for when I worked in the dot com space were family businesses. And I think that's why this book resonated with me because, you know, I remember like a couple coming in and they had had a fight before they got to work, you know, and you're kind of thrown into this weird, you know, emotional territory that you don't really understand or something that's happening in their marriage kind of trickles in or they hire a kid who's not equipped to have a job that you have to be dealing with every single day, who's leveling up in the business. So fascinating dynamics and looking back on it. I'm like, those are great seats for stories for sure.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (02:21)

Yeah. Yeah, so every family is a foreign country, right? So it has its own rules, laws, language. And I think maybe that was why I ended up spending so much time with the Taylors in the story. So just because I became wrapped up in that world of this is their universe. So, and again, a little bit of nose pressed up to the glass there, I think. So I will say this, I really missed Sharon and Mel once I'd stopped working on The Animators. I am very much in the headspace of missing the Baker-Taylors now. So, because I've, yeah.

Amy Clark (02:57)

Yeah, I miss them. I'm like, I want to reread this. Like, I feel jealous of all of you that haven't read it or haven't read The Animators, which, you know, I just remember that being so mind-blowing just the idea behind the worlds that you created in your stories and so I felt equally immersed in this. I want to talk about you know The Animators had a lot of acclaim and it's been a decade nearly if I'm correct sent till the second novel so I'm wondering what's changed for you with your relationship to crafts storytelling maybe even the publishing industry because you know a lot has changed since your last book.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (03:47)

Absolutely. Yeah. So I remember when The Animators came out, it was January 2017. So it was in the middle of a few shifts in terms of, I think, like the national spirit, how people feel about being Americans definitely changed, I think, in some ways. So and the way that people consume material, especially books, that's changed a lot the past decade has been, I think, really interesting for my process. So I'm a lot older now too. So I am 42. When I started working on The Animators, I was in my late 20s. It's been a lot. So that was a point in my life at which I could stay up writing until 2:30 in the morning and still be fairly sharp. Those days are over.

My brain shuts off at 9 p.m. So my process has changed in terms of its structure, but I think it still feels the same. It still feels essential and nourishing. And if I get up and I have my writing time from 5.30 to 6.30, the rest of my day is better because of it.

In the same way that if I spend a block of time reading at night, I tend to have a better night's sleep. I'm not sure why that works the way it does, but it does. So yeah, I don't think I'll ever stop writing. So the publishing, it happens in its own time, but my life is better when I write.

Amy Clark (05:31)

Yeah, and our lives are better when you write because we get stories from you. So I want to talk about this, you know, maybe feeling pressure to replicate that first book. Did you

have any pressures when you went into it? this timeline of events too, what was that like with your publishing house?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (05:33)

My publishing house is great. They are so supportive and wonderful and I think most publishing houses know that the creative process can be really think that's, you know, it's always nice when you're working with people who kind of know that it happens on its own timeline in a big way.

I don't know, I don't know. So the past 10 years have been kind of a blur. I spent a lot of time working with this book. And I think that time spent, it just made it more of a labor of love. So, and that's okay. It takes as long as it takes.

I'll be quite honest. I think a lot of writers who publish one book feel a great deal of anxiety about publishing the second one because it seems to be something that happens in the industry. Second novels don't always come. They don't always come. Yeah. And if that's the way it happens, then that's the way it happens. So, and there was a point in time when I thought, hmm, if The Animators is my only book would I be okay with that? So and I had to come to a place where I was okay with that. I'm relieved that it actually came to fruition because it means, you know, I'll publish more and that's okay.

There are lot of things I do in terms of work. I write, I also teach. I'm a high school English teacher. That's work that means a lot to me. It's a lot of fun. We have a good time. yeah, so and fun fact, actually after spring break, I'm teaching The Great Gatsby. Which has, Gatsby shows up in Returns and Exchanges and it's...

Amy Clark (07:38)

Kayla, we may have to have you back just for our Gatsby class for our kids here.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (07:48)

Totally, yeah. I love teaching Gatsby, but I think there's so much in that book that still speaks to who we are. think there are definitely some ties that connect that book with Returns and Exchanges. It's been on my mind a lot as I've been drafting the last iterations of that

Amy Clark (08:11)

Well, let's talk about the seeds of the story since it's so different than your other one. Did you know that this is the story you were going to write the second time? What did this look like for you as far as the intrigue for storytelling?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (08:24)

So I originally got the idea for Returns and Exchanges back in 2018. I was living in Louisville, Kentucky. So it's been an interesting journey. I went back home to Kentucky to live for two years. I'm not originally from Louisville. Louisville is like the big city down there. Then I came right back up to New York in large part because of the job market. Yeah. So that's the way it goes, right? That's the story of leaving the South. You're leaving for work basically.

But I got the idea when I was shopping in a Sears that was about to shut down and it was in a big mall. It was one of those anchor stores that the mall really depended upon.

And it was in like the very last days. Like they were selling the fixtures and it was almost completely empty aside from these tables and boxes like in the center of the store where people were, including me, were going through the goods. And it's like, okay, found some winter socks, found some earrings for a quarter of the price. And I just remembered looking around and thinking to myself, this place looks like a gutted animal.

This is, this is so indescribably sad. Like the end of this, this is a retail death. And here I am sharing this experience with all of these strangers. We're all kind of like shopping in silence in this, this big cavern that used to be a store. And I could not get that out of my head. I couldn't. And I've long been a fan of retail spaces that have been abandoned. So I've got a sweet spot for dead malls. I think a lot of us do. Yeah, yeah, it's a thing. I think just generationally, we're all tuned into that same kind of loss. And so the idea of a store closing down and what happens to the people who are left behind once this entity no longer serves its purpose as a business. What happens to those people? And the Taylors just kind of came out of that. And Fred and Fran being from eastern Kentucky, you know, that's my home. So that story is one that I know and know well. So the family just kind of came out of that one shopping trip to Sears. It's funny where your books come from. You never know. You never know. Yeah.

Amy Clark (11:07)

Yeah, you don't. You don't know. That's amazing.

Yeah, I definitely, I feel like, know, the existence of third spaces to me, the mall was a third space, I didn't have money, I just would walk around the mall, and it's a place where, a lot of my teen years were spent and even college years were hanging out at the mall and, my kids too, the experience of, you know, not having a place to go with them during the day and just going to the mall play area and I would pack a lunch, you know, it's just one of those places that's so, existent in my mind and, and those environments, like picking out our school clothes or first bra, like all of those experiences were in these little

retail spaces. And I felt really thrown back in time because right at the beginning of the story for our listeners you know they're shooting a commercial and you immediately are dropping in things like isotoner gloves and like all of these old brands that were so familiar and create such a display in there. It was just so much fun to reminisce and think about the ways that we used to interact in those spaces and what they meant to us when we were kids.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (12:18)

Yeah. Absolutely. And it's funny because this book is set in Lexington, Kentucky. So it's the two primary cities in Kentucky are Louisville and Lexington. If you want to shop, if you have to have surgery, if you have to take a standardized test, at least when I was younger, those were the places that you went. And if you lived in like the eastern part of the state, like I did, you went to Lexington. And one of my primary memories of going to Lexington is of going to the malls there.

And later I went to the University of Kentucky, I went to college in Lexington, I lived in Lexington as a young adult, so I've got this real, I've got a connection to it that that still feels alive. But yeah, a lot of Lexington was it's going on a shopping trip. So, of course I wrote this book, of course I wrote, you know, yeah.

Amy Clark (13:13)

I love it. Yeah. Obviously we have such a strong sense of place, but I'm wondering, did you look at other multi-generational novels for structure and tone? And did you always know it was going to be multi-generational, what you were going to tell in this family, which have multiple children. So you are really taking on a lot with this project as far as viewpoint shifts and what you're offering readers to the insides of this family, not just the parents themselves, but the children as well.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (13:44)

Yeah, this book went through a lot of structural changes. So I experimented with a lot of different shapes before I decided on the current one. So for a while, it was just the couple Fred and Fran who had dueling perspectives. For a while, it was Fred, Fran, and then because this is the first interview that I've done for Returns and Exchanges. It's like, is this a spoiler? But it's Wendy, right? So it's, I think it's okay to, so Fran's love interest, basically.

Amy Clark (14:14)

Wait, are you wanting us to not talk about Wendy? Is that supposed to be a surprise?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (14:22)

I think she's such a big part of the story. Let's, let's go ahead and yeah. No, I am. Yeah. So yeah. Yeah. So it's, yeah. So this is.

Amy Clark (14:25)

Are you okay with us talking about Wendy? Okay, okay, I want to make sure. Okay, I don't want to spoil anything for you on this side. Okay.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (14:32)

No, no, no, that's OK, too. Some of these are still questions that I'm still answering for myself. But no, this is very much Wendy's story, too. So, yeah. So Wendy had a perspective early on. She was one of the POVs. So there was a very early draft, maybe 2019 or 2020, that also included the kids. And it felt quite fleeting. And I ended up abandoning it for a while and then picking it back up.

But especially thinking about books that I read and looked at in terms of, wow, this structure is really well done. How did they pull this off? Anne Patchett, Commonwealth, is an incredible book. And the way that she balances all of these different voices in this big sprawling family was something that had a big imprint on me. So another one that I actually didn't pick up until kind of late in the process. And I think I was working on like one of my last drafts for Random House, Jonathan Franzen reading Crossroads. Yeah, I was shocked at just how much common ground Returns and Exchanges shared with Crossroads, especially having picked up that book so late in the process. It's like, no, there's even a Plymouth Fury in here.

Amy Clark (15:36)

You were influenced without even knowing you were influenced, right?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (15:57)

Yeah, yeah. So I was just like, how do we design the same car? But no, great car. I love Plymouths. But I loved that book and really admired the way that it was structured. See, I love East of Eden. John Steinbeck, that book has a just, that's maybe like a super English teacher pick, but I I love it too. Yeah. It's an amazing story about sibling stories, which is also sort of a sweet spot for me, just stories about brothers and sisters kind of, you know, sharing the same experience and yet two different, completely different experiences. I always think of that book. just think it's maybe, it's the perfect novel in lot of ways.

This is also a super English teacher answer. But every year I teach AP Lit, and it's a wonderful class. We always read King Lear. Yeah. And so I revisit it annually, but with an eye towards, so we're teaching this. So what are some of the most important high points

to kind of strike as I'm talking about this with my students? And that idea of power and influence, but also a patriarchy.

And in this case, you've got, and this is super Appalachian but you have the family matriarchy. So that's the family structure that I see most commonly back home. So, you know, the woman who pretty much runs the house. It's kind of like, how do you negotiate between these two visions of a family? Right. So you have the king of the family, the influential patriarch, and then you have the person who really runs things right? So that was something that I thought a lot about as well. So especially as I was drafting like the last couple of versions of this novel.

Amy Clark (18:02)

Yeah, I mean, I could see you on, you know, with Jonathan Franzen and Commonwealth, them all being on a bookshelf together. So that all makes sense in my mind. I love hearing about the classics too, that inspire you and you being so immersed in this process with your students really has to also like influence the ways that you write and how you approach it. And some of my favorite storytellers are constantly only reading classics, right? They're looking for what, what makes something timeless? What, why do we keep going back to it? Why do we want to revisit this? What is it telling us about story? And I think this book, while it's set in the in 1980s, it's something that it feels timeless to me, you know, and I also am in my forties and so it brings about feelings of a certain time as well. You know, my family is also, I have family from the South and so a lot of the themes really resonated with me because I saw those dynamics playing out with my grandparents, my great grandparents and so it was really just beautiful telling in a way that feels really timeless in that multi-generational perspective as well.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (19:12)

Thank you. No, I'm so glad to hear that. It's, I'm still at that phase where talking about Returns and Exchanges as something that exists apart from me out in the world is still, it's very novel to me. So it's, this is amazing. I'm so glad it spoke to you. Yeah. Yeah.

Amy Clark (19:19)

Yes, I loved this book. I told you this. I cannot stop talking about this book. This is definitely one of my like headlining experiences of the summer and I want to get in a little bit into your title, like Returns and Exchanges. It's obviously a store transaction, but it also seems a little metaphorical. What were you saying with this title?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (19:42)

Okay. So I have to say, so the title actually came from a friend of mine. my friend Cliff, and he is also a writer. So I'm uneasy about titles and I think it's a side effect of having lived

with this thing for so long, this book, and it feels like this, you know, separate entity from me, it's hard to, it's almost like naming a kid in a way. So The Animators, when we came up with that title, it was actually like a committee decision. Random House. I think it sold under another title. I think it sold under The List. I think that was the title of it when it sold to Random House. Slightly punny, I suppose, in a way, given the subject matter.

But also when I think about the reasons as to why that title fits so well, I go back to Gatsby again. And it's this idea of class ascension. And I think this is a common belief for people. This is something that is considered a very quiet part of the package when people think about wanting to make more money, wanting to climb the class ladder. So I want to be well off. I want to be affluent, right? So what that comes with is a shift in identity. And that's not for everybody, of course. I don't want to make a blanket statement, but I think for many Americans, that idea of going up a rung or two on the class ladder, it has to do, there's kind of an identity makeover. You can become the version of you that you have always wanted to be. And of course, that's a really complicated idea. So and you have this married couple who never really paused to talk about it, mostly because they've spent their adult lives working and raising a family and maybe the idea of who are you, where are you going, is never a question that really came up because they've been busy doing other things. But that's the question that makes Fred and Fran so different, I think. It's that idea of my bank account looks different. Does this change who I am?

I think Fred would answer in the affirmative and he would answer with a certain amount of relief, but also by, I don't know, by later in the book, maybe he's a little bit crestfallen that, hey, it actually doesn't fix the way you feel inside. It doesn't.

I think Fran's a little more wary of money and probably wary of that question. And she's going to double down. She can become a wealthy, wealthy woman and she will still keep that soup can of grease on top of her stove. And she'll do it just because she's always done it and this is who she is. She's going to double down on who she is because she doesn't want to lose it.

So yeah, the idea of a return and an exchange, but an exchange made in terms of identity once the money has come in is, that's a really tangled idea for people, even now. Yeah. Yeah.

Amy Clark (23:19)

Sure. Well, shout out to Cliff for the best book idea title ever. When you explain it, it's like, well, of course that does make sense.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (23:28)

He's brilliant, yeah.

Amy Clark (23:44)

And I do love the idea that, so much of the book is about when the success of the store happens, how it kind of shifts both their what they're doing throughout the day, like who is being prioritized. It would be very difficult in any type of family business to not cast your kids aside, to kind of move things with your business. We're seeing a little bit of that as well. And then, you know, these two perspectives within a couple of one, getting very excited about what wealth will allow them to embrace and seeing your partner change in that way and identifying with things that maybe the two of you didn't identify with before is a really interesting thing to talk about and to think about because you know as much as we would like to believe that in the face of you know suddenly receiving a windfall of money or some great success coming to us that we will fundamentally stay the same.

Maybe not. Maybe that's something to think about. And also we've all witnessed other people doing those very things where suddenly they're not really part of our circle or we aren't having the same kinds of conversations. Sometimes I, you know, we get invited to parties and people are talking about things that are just don't even seem real to me anymore. like, it's so out there, these ideas around wealth and class that they don't even acknowledge that like we all aren't going on luxury vacations right now. Some of us are you know, stockpiling canned food and preparing for a recession. And it's just kind of like living in different worlds and still being sometimes in the same orbit of those worlds.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (25:08)

Yep. Yep. Absolutely, yeah. And that is, if I have a sweet spot for writing, if my stories tend to go to one place in particular, class is that place and work is that place and what and not just not just careers but it's it's work- the things that we do in order to survive and to keep ourselves afloat and how those aspects kind of affect identity and the way that we see ourselves. I think those are those are questions that are always going to fascinate me if anything because they affect everyone right.

So, and I think it's really interesting, particularly with Gen X and Younger, the way that we think about work and the way that we think about money. We're in a position in which we may never retire.

Amy Clark (26:00)

Yes. True.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (26:16)

And yeah, and I am, I've already made this decision for myself and it's, you know, I will probably never retire. And that is okay. I just want my work to mean something. And I want my work to feel to feel like a way that I can connect to the world and to other people. So, and I think that's kind of the best that we can hope for in terms of work. We can hope that that work ties us to the world and to other people in a way that is healthy and a way that is just positive generally and works not always that good, right? Yeah, yeah.

So, and thinking about money in particular, it's not something that makes a lot of us feel positive. It mostly makes us feel anxious and worried and kind of the future. Who are we? Where are we going? Right? Yeah, I think I'm always gonna write about these issues. They're not gonna go away.

Amy Clark (27:03)

Right, exactly. Yeah, it's true. And I feel like, the divide has grown larger, it feels like lately to, you know, are we all living the same experiences? And, this showcases, you know, just one family can be, accessing lots of different experiences through what they acquire. And for some they suffer and some of them thrive and some are abandoned or discarded during a time where, you know, business is booming. And so I think it's such a, a great little contemplation. I want to talk a little bit about, we have the 80s, it's in Kentucky, and I want to talk specifically about how you got this story all set for readers with the store itself. So for readers that haven't read it yet, we get this 19th era department store. We've got Atari consoles, holiday dish sets, Isotoner gloves. How did you approach the research for scene setting to make those details feel lived in and not like a nostalgic checklist.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (28:37)

Yeah, gosh, I love research. I love doing research for, especially for fiction. So the research that I did for The Animators in particular, so because I'm not an animator, so doing research on technique and kind of aesthetics that connect to the work that these two women are doing. That was a part of the writing process that was just tons of fun. And same thing with Returns and Exchanges. Something that I do when I am in my home and I want to relax and maybe I'm cleaning or I'm rearranging books or I'm going through my papers or something, I will go on YouTube and I will find hour long blocks of commercials from like, yeah, ABC 1978, right?

So or trying to find commercial blocks for Lexington, Kentucky affiliates in 1980. Right? So a lot of that was and that was something that I did before I started working on The Animators, or I'm sorry, before I started working on Returns and Exchanges. So yeah, it was just something that I did to kind of soothe myself and put something on the background. And more often than not, I would whatever I was doing and I would watch

these older commercials. And so the idea of product placement, especially for smaller regional chains, and that's definitely, that's an artifact, right? We don't really have those anymore.

So a Baker-Taylor's that is a well-loved store that only exists in what, eight states, nine states? That's not something that exists. And so it would be a real pleasure to go to like a Detroit NBC affiliate and to see stores that were big there in the 1980s or a Dallas affiliate and to see what was this world like, this very specific world in 1982. So what were they selling? Who were they selling it to? Right? That was, I think, kind of where my research started. And from there, it just bloomed into me trying to find as many store layout blueprints as I could to see how different stores approached, okay, so what do you put by the door? What do you put by the cash register? What do we consider an impulse purchase, right? To the history of the department store, even though this was a discount department store and during a very specific time I did a lot of reading on places like Macy's and the fact that around the turn of the 20th century these for spaces for women.

And it was one sanctioned place where ladies could go unescorted to have lunch and to be with other women and to socialize. And in retrospect, Fran probably came from a lot of those readings. The idea that this could be a women's space and also a place where her talents and things that she would have been doing in terms of homemaking anyway, it puts her in a prime place to run a successful business. So that's, I think, where a lot of this started. and it's honestly, I'm so sad that I won't be able to like read the 70s or read Nixonland and just tell myself, well, this is research.

Amy Clark (32:17)

Yeah, yeah, I get it.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (32:19)

Yeah, so yeah, yeah, so or Trucking USA. So it's I read a lot about the 70s and 80s as well. Just whatever I could get my hands on and whatever I had time to read. There was a lot of nonfiction that fed into this as well. So yeah, I'll miss doing this. I just started working on a new project and the I'm just getting into the research. So but I miss my reading material from the past five or six years.

Amy Clark (32:46)

Yeah, it's so interesting because I had interviewed an author for her book called One's Company, which is based upon Three's Company, the TV show, and she was so immersed in this tunnel for the show that I think it was very very bittersweet to say goodbye to the show. So learning about like how she found things on eBay or, you know, would watch these episodes to see the set build and all of that is so fun and fascinating to me. And

especially, I feel like a lot of writers during the pandemic found like these little hyper fixations to kind of keep their brain busy or be comforting to them.

We just interviewed someone for The Beheading Game, which was about Anne Boleyn. And she said, you know, the author was talking about the experience of this being her comfort thing through a difficult season and so I can imagine this YouTube time was like something you looked forward to and allowed you to immerse yourself in a completely different world than the one we're living in right now too to just kind of go somewhere else mentally for a little bit as well.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (33:50)

Absolutely. Yeah. So, and it's funny because like a lot of people my age, I don't have a satellite or sorry, I sound like I'm 80. Yeah. So I don't have cable. Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah. Yeah. So it's, I'm not really exposed to commercials in the way that I was used to seeing them growing up.

Amy Clark (33:58)

Yeah, you need a cable or whatever. Wherever the channels come from, don't have that. Exactly. I get it. I'm 40 something too. Yeah.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (34:19)

Like kind of, you know, a flow of commercials, not just something that you get as a bumper before you watch a YouTube clip, but just a flow before you get back to whatever program it is you're watching. If you watch commercial blocks from that period, it's so funny. They're so earnest and kind of cheesy. It's an idealized vision of what American life is like, and it's not something you really see anymore.

My prime commercial watching time is when I go to visit my mother who does watch yeah yeah absolutely mm-hmm mm-hmm yeah yeah yeah so it's it's TV the way I remember it right except for the fact that these commercials are you know what it is it's irony there is an element of irony to just about every ad I see on TV now which is kind of, it's odd. It's not the same TV that we grew up with and it's not the same kind of advertising that Baker-Taylor's would have invested in. So those commercials were very earnest as well. So yeah, it's odd to think about when that change happened.

Amy Clark (35:15)

Yeah. It makes sense. Well, I want to talk about your character work. I think you are unmatched when it comes to immersion. So I am going to quote you. I hope that's okay. When you describe Fred, you said, "This Fred shined under the gaze of others. Years of talking to customers had given way to a higher form of crowd work. During weekend golf

dates with his Southern star buddies, he'd apparently developed a reputation for being the comedian, a cornpone sage with Don Rickles incisors. He'd begun to crib lines from films, effect a drawl likewise gangked from John Wayne, I'd like to take his measure he said with a cool skepticism he said about a new neighbor An airy I' kindly doubt it in response to Fran's suggestion that they bump floor manager wages”.

I feel so there. Like I can see this man. I know him. It all comes together in my brain and to create a character so distinct there is such a level of craft detail to just make that one passage.

Can you speak to this and how you want it to embed? Especially, I know, for me, I had to look up some things like who is this? You know, who is, who is she referring to? Right. It does require maybe some readers to do a little research if they're not familiar with these cultural touchstones that you're making in this passage. So I want to hear about crafting specifically details like this for readers to really create that immersion experience.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (37:17)

Boy, you're absolutely right. So I have mentioned John Wayne to students who are pretty well read and they said, who? And that's, it's true. Like this is, this is definitely, if he's a cultural touchstone, he is kind of in the past tense, right? Absolutely. Yeah.

Amy Clark (37:36)

Don Rickles too. Like I was like, okay, let me look up his incisors. Right? I'm like, I want to see specifically his teeth. Like what is this bringing about? What is she saying about this? You know, my husband, of course, he was like, don't you know? And I'm like, maybe, maybe it's floating in my head and I didn't know. And when I saw him, did. But I feel like to specifically craft just this passage, I'm like, okay, she's like creating this very larger than life man, you know?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (37:55)

Yeah. It's, I should say just at the I really worked to try to invest in Fred. I had a really hard time with his character. there's this really wonderful craft advisement that actually came from George Saunders, I think. He said, you have to love your characters. Even if they are terrible, you have to love your characters. Otherwise, you don't get that access to them.

So spending that time with Fred and his insecurities, while also knowing that quite frankly, if I had worked for a Fred Taylor, it would have been terrible. I have worked for Fred Taylor's. They're bullies. So especially with women. And that is something that it affected the way that I wrote him, I think early on in those drafts. So my relationship with Fred as a character, I think deepened once I started digging through those layers and sort

of thinking to myself, okay, what kind of man does Fred Taylor see himself as? What does he aspire to be? And especially knowing this guy and kind of knowing what he would have been exposed to in terms of masculine culture, like John Wayne is one of the first things to come up, right?

So a guy Fred Taylor's age, he would have seen John Wayne and thought, man, there's a real man. And of course, Fred's son, Josiah, is like, that's insane. I hate John Wayne movies. It's like, that's ridiculous. That's manhood, really? as a writer, I'm a really big fan of ephemera. I'm a really big fan of what are these characters literally carrying around in their coat pockets and in their purses? But what are the details that kind of influence them inside? So what are the things that they see and hear that are so small that they kind of maybe they defy large mention and they might give me a window into this is the expression on Fred's face when he's at a cocktail party and he is desperately trying to impress the guy in front of him right?

Or this is the look on his son's face when, you know, he's trying to get his dad's attention and he is absolutely failing. And so he decides to do something horrible to get that attention that he's needing. Right? So what are kind of the little guideposts to character that I can hang on to? So I really wanted to get Fred right, because he is so unlike me and so unlike my own experience. But I think that's what writing is all about. That's what makes fiction so difficult. You're trying to gain entry to characters who are not you, who do not have your experiences or your thoughts or feelings about the world. And so I'm really glad to hear that Fred became real, that Fred's a real guy now because he's pretty far from my own experience.

Amy Clark (41:18)

Mm-hmm. Did you grow to love him then? You did.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (41:26)

I did. I did. Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. I love all of these characters, but I hurt for Fred. Yeah. It's hard to not know that he's in pain. He just doesn't like who he is. He doesn't like who he is. He's not comfortable with it. And that's very human.

Amy Clark (41:42)

Yeah, that is very human. Well, he does become involved in something called Order of the Southern Star. It links the story to post civil war Southern networks. This is quite the brotherhood that you are, bringing to his story where that really seems like a big shift in his character development and where he's headed. How much research went into depicting this brotherhood that you are bringing to Fred's life.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (42:22)

Okay, so that's really interesting. And I was, I am gratified that you're bringing this up because it was part of the story that it's kind of fleeting, but you're right. It's absolutely important. I did as much research as I could on like fraternal order culture. So I know that some of those details are pretty highly guarded, also there's a pretty large variety of those kinds of communities that men joined.

So what I did find interesting was the fact that right around the point that Fred would have joined this fictional organization, the Southern Star, it would have been kind of the decline of fraternal orders. So fewer men were actually involved in these communities. But for Fred in particular, because I knew how hungry he was to belong and to have those alliances, especially like within his community, within his region. He just, he wanted to be connected with men who seemed to know exactly who they were and exactly where they were going in life. So when he kind of gets the invite from his friends, he is extremely excited about it, right? But I wanted him to be so fixated on that sense of order and belonging and kind of community investment. Like I am part of this inner circle that there are some aspects of the organization that he kind of turns a blind eye to.

I knew that that part of the story would have some darkness attached to it. And I knew that that was where Fred was headed. And I also knew that it was his character driving him. This is an impulse that he is, he's never really going to be able to control it. So, and it's, I think there too, the fact that that's a breaking point with the Taylors with Fred and Fran, I think that's really interesting that that was the point at which Fran was like, okay, I don't agree with this. I'm not sure why you did this. I think we need to talk about it. And he just walks away from the conversation.

Amy Clark (44:30)

Yeah.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (44:49)

So yeah, again, Fred is extremely human, right? Yeah.

Amy Clark (44:56)

Yeah well, we had debated if we were even going to talk about this, but I feel like it comes so early in the story and we got approval to discuss just lightly touch upon. Fran has a growing attraction to Wendy who is working at the shop and that kind of moves her story in a different direction. And because Fred is drawn to this good Christian values kind of model for his business and finds himself in this orbit of these men who are also supportive of that. You're really portraying a very complex queer experience for her desires, for what she wants to do in this historical moment.

And I'm wondering if you were surprised by anything when you were crafting this about how you wanted to place this on in these scenes. I will say for people who are big fans of Carol, that's the feeling that I got the movie scene where they're in the Christmas shop where she meets someone and that's how all of it transpires. so, and it's very like mimicking the feelings that I feel about the movie Carol. So if you're a Carol fan, I think you'll really appreciate this.

I would love to hear a little bit about the research process to make those moments feel really authentic to this time period as well.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (46:16)

Sure, absolutely. So I think it's another case of character kind of driving plot in that same way that we know from the get-go that Fred is going to join the Southern Star because he can't not do it. He cannot help himself.

And it's one of the things that I love about Returns and Exchanges. So in my view, this is a love story. It's a love story. It's a family story. But you know, it's chiefly it is a love story. And it's Fran and Wendy's love story. And knowing who Fran is and knowing that she is unfailingly true to herself. So and that she sees the world with an honesty and an unwillingness to harbor illusions.

I think I knew from the very beginning when she met Wendy, there is no way that she is not going to be with Wendy. There's no way that's not going to happen. It's not a will they or won't they story. It is a what happens when Fran becomes honest about this and says, here's what I want. Here's what our lives are going to look like.

What does the rest of the family do? What happens to that business? How do the extended family members kind of deal with this? Fran is, I think for me, she was the easiest character to love. And I think it's that.

It's her lack of patience with illusion and her lack of patience with keeping up appearances and her desire to live a life that's genuine and hers, regardless of money or class. Where does that take her? So she's quite heroic in a lot of ways. And of course, Wendy is the ultimate hero. I love Wendy. She's amazing. Yeah, yeah, she's amazing. I do too.

Amy Clark (48:24)

Oh, I do too. I love these women. I'm like obsessed with these women. That really is like, it's like Fred, come on. But like these women. I loved these women in the story and I love

how that relationship develops and also just the honesty with which everyone in the story needs to reckon with the idea of what it looks like. For listeners, you know, Fran is the face of the business too. She's the one that they're parading. She has to be the one to do the commercials and present this perfect appearance. She's known in the community is known for that relationship and her family. And so there is a lot at stake for her children, for her husband, for that whole house of cards to fall, even though she has to live in her truth, which is what you're rooting for this character throughout the story.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (49:25)

Yeah, absolutely. So, and it's the fact that, I mean, Fran and Wendy are, they're made for each other. They're made for each other. They're so incredible, just as separate people. But when they're together, it's just like, come on, that's completely organic. But I do have to say, this is really interesting. So, and I'm trying to find a way to talk about this without there being spoilers involved, I'll do my best. So late in the book, the Taylor baby, Bertie, she's the very youngest and she's the only girl. She gets her chapter.

The beginning of the book is Christmas 79, right? So in Bertie's chapter, she's in high school and it's the early 1990s. That part of the book, I wrote that so quickly. It just, it came to me almost fully formed. And it was because I wrote about her mother first. And I wrote about Wendy early on. And Wendy enters Birdie's life when she's still fairly young. And it's like, yeah, Fran walked so Birdie could run and do lots of other things. And so the fact that her voice and her chapter and what happens to her, the fact that it came to me so quickly, it kind of doesn't surprise me because all of the pages and pages that I spent on Fran, I was also, I was building her daughter. So, and I was doing kind of the same thing with Wendy as well. So, yeah.

Amy Clark (51:01)

Yeah. I love this. Well, Kayla, obviously as a school teacher, we need you to boss us around a little bit. If book clubs select your book for their meetings, what is your dream conversation that we're talking about?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (51:12)

Oh boy. So I think one thing that never ceases to amaze me is the degree to which shopping is an emotional experience for Americans. So I think in lots of other cultures, of course, it's an emotional experience. But for us, it is deep seated. There are a lot of raw feelings about who we are, who we'd like to be all of these things kind of come up when we're shopping.

And the very beginning of that book talking about Christmas toys in particular, when I started writing about the Atari and like the season that it came out and the fact that it

was this toy that people would kind of clamor over and get into fights over, which actually does happen at the very beginning of the book, and it's over in Atari. I'm really interested in hearing about what mythical object people kind of still hold up in their minds as, oh, this is the present that I really wanted in 1992. Like this says so much about who I want to be and the kind of life that I want to have.

It's funny, even when I'm teaching, my classes are very conversational. So I try my best to, I want my students to talk. I want them to debate. I want them to have these discussions. My voice is not the only one in the room. So very, very Socratic seminar style. book club and I was hearing this conversation, that's probably the first place I would take it. It's like, what was your toy? So mine was Polly Pocket and I never, yep. I never got a Polly Pocket, yeah.

Amy Clark (52:49)

Yeah. I was gonna ask you, yeah, what was yours? Polly Pocket?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (52:57)

So I'm 42, maybe it's time to get a Polly Pocket. Yeah, yeah. Maybe so, yeah, so what was yours?

Amy Clark (53:01)

Do it. This could be like a way to celebrate this book actually, you know? I really wanted some American Girl dolls. I know that I was a little bit older for those, but I babysat a lot of kids that had these like expensive dolls and you know, all the accessories for them. I was fascinated by them. I was a little bit out of the age demographic, but there was a part of me that longed for it. And I had a cabbage patch doll, but my great aunt could sew. And so they would also, in lieu of them, she made her own. I appreciate it far more now as an adult, but she did make like replicas of the Cabbage Patch doll that she like, so that would be the doll, you know, with the yarn hair and everything.

But I really wanted a whole bunch more Cabbage Patch dolls for sure. And I did not have very many. But yeah, there was a lot. And also speaking to like, just random things, I was obsessed with capsule wardrobes when I was in middle school. And that would be something that I would like obsess about.

Like if I could ever have enough money, I would have 20 easy pieces that could be worn like, was like, I was planning like I was going to do business and I was just a kid on a school bus, you know what I mean? But that was like the dream for me would be the 20 easy capsule pieces. And my mother gave me, I think I was only given like a hundred dollars or something at Walmart to spend. And I bought all these easy pieces that ended

up balling up into like terrible, you know, they shrunk. They were wrinkled forever. My mom was like, why did you buy that? But in my mind, I was like, if I had that crisp Oxford shirt, I would never need anything else in my life. Isn't that funny?

Kayla Rae Whitaker (54:47)

I mean, I think it's a reflection of good taste, first of all. So a capsule wardrobe, it's a great idea. yeah. So, but American Girl dolls, I hear you. I feel that down in my gut. So have you ever been to an American Girl doll store?

Amy Clark (54:50)

Yes, I did the tiny tea with my daughter that was like \$2,000 and she still, I remember we took her home on the train and she goes, I don't know if I should tell you this mommy, but I'm still a little bit hungry. I was like, sister, we're done. I'm broke. We're done. That's a wrap.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (55:23)

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it's, yeah. So it's definitely an experience. So it's to see like that many nine-year-old girls just walking around in a fever dream. Like just like you can see it like in their eyes, just like this is amazing. It's a total trip. yeah, yeah, it's great. Yeah. So it's the magic of retail, right?

Amy Clark (55:42)

Yeah. I love it.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (55:52)

Yeah, it's funny, one of my very early jobs, so I live in New York and we don't have any in this region unfortunately, but it was Big Lots. I don't know if you ever, yeah. Okay, yeah, so can I ask where you live?

Amy Clark (56:04)

Yes, yeah we have big lots, yep. I'm in South Bend, So I'm, yeah, very Midwest. Yeah.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (56:19)

Are you in, oh, okay, yeah. I love Big Lots, yeah, so they had them in Kentucky. So I worked at a Big Lots for a while and I ended up applying for a job there because I shopped there so frequently. I found Target financially intimidating and truthfully still do sometimes. So yeah, but I shopped a lot at Big Lots when I was in college and ended up working there. was deeply satisfying to be able to just block items. And it's like there, aisle 11 is perfect. Nothing else in this world is perfect, but aisle 11 is. So I think probably there's some of that in Returns and Exchanges as well.

Amy Clark (56:55)

Absolutely. Well, my last question. Before I ask it, I want to let listeners know that Kayla is going to come with me on the other side of the paywall. It's \$5 to be on the other side of the paywall. And that's where you get the spoiler chat. And I also am making a book list. So you'll get a printable of that that's around her book's themes. And it keeps us commercial free and gives space to writers like Kayla to share their story. But I want to ask you now that this project is complete, what are you feeling? Whether it's with this project or with life in general, but also I get to tell you, I just love your stories so much. I'm genuinely an enormous fan of your work and your books take me places that I'm so grateful I get to go. I hope that I can encourage readers who haven't gotten connected with your work to interact with it because what you build and what you create for readers is so immersive and different than anyone else. just, your character work is so distinct. It's amazing. I'm so proud of you, but I would love to hear what you're feeling proud of right now.

Kayla Rae Whitaker (58:03)

Thanks, Amy. That means a lot. You know, I am proud of the book and I'm proud of the structure because I spent a lot of time working on it.

And I'm also, I'm proud of the, I'm proud of the messaging that came out of it. So it's all about fighting for the life that you want, right? And fighting to become a version of yourself that you'd like to be, the version of yourself you believe you can be. And the fact that we follow Fran so deeply into her life and we get to track her through so many decades. The idea that we never stop learning and we never stop growing and it doesn't matter how old we are is immensely comforting to me. I think at a time when sometimes it can be hard to find comfort. But the fact of the matter is we never stop learning and growing. And I think the book taught me that, if that sounds odd, but it's true. It's true. And that's an affirmation. It's a lovely sentiment to have as you grow older.

Amy Clark (59:28)

Yes, absolutely. Well, Kayla, this was a delight. I will see you guys on the other side.

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