

Hear Us Roar, hosted by Maggie Smith and sponsored by the Women's Fiction Writers Association

Debut Author Podcast 99: Kathryn Holzman

Kathryn Holzman's short fiction has appeared in over twenty online literary magazines and print anthologies. She is the author of a collection of short fiction, *FLATLANDERS*, Shire Press 2019.

Her first novel *REAL ESTATE* was published by Propertius Press in Fall, 2020. She received the Grand Prize in the 2020 Eyelands International Short Story Contest. Links to her work can be found at kathrynholzman.com

Welcome. This is Hear Us Roar. A Podcast where we talk to debut authors about their journey to publication. Our thanks go out to the Women's Fiction Writers Association for their support of this broadcast. WFWA is a volunteer-run organization dedicated to providing a community for career-focused women fiction writers via networking, communication, and continuing support of their career growth. If you'd like to learn more or to join WFWA, visit WomanFictionWriters.org. I'm your host, Maggie Smith.

MS: Welcome everybody to the Podcast. Our guest is Kathryn Holzman, and her book *Real Estate* was published in November 2020 by Propertius Press. Welcome to the Podcast.

KH: *Thank you for inviting me. I'm delighted to be here.*

MS: First, we'd like to hear what *Real Estate* is all about.

KH: *Real Estate is the story of two families who live side-by-side in the Santa Clara Valley in the 1960s and 1970s when that valley morphed from a lush agricultural valley into what we now know as Silicon Valley. It sees this change through two very different protagonists' eyes. One is Harriet, the daughter of a Japanese war bride with a Navy pilot father. The other is her next-door neighbor Bobby, a science whiz who can do no wrong. They have a short flirtation, but their parents come between them almost immediately. The novel follows their lives and how the change in the Valley affects them. Later they meet again, but by then everything has changed.*

MS: That's a rich time in history to be delving into. Was that history that you knew from your parents, from your own experience, or did you just do research?

KH: *I love to do research. I did a lot of research, but I was raised in the Santa Clara Valley, so I have a real view of how those changes affected various families that I knew. Then, I drew other characters to follow it through.*

MS: And I'm assuming Bobby as a computer whiz probably gets involved in Silicon Valley from the computer end of it. Does he found the company or...?

KH: *My older brother who was also a science whiz attended a lot of science fairs with Steve Wozniak. They were competitive all the way through high school. I come from a family of engineers, so I felt I had a window on the engineering personality. So, that's where I started.*

MS: And then you have an interesting thing with the Japanese bride and the serviceman as the parents. Was that also something that you knew about, or you just invented?

KH: *That was a meld of people I knew. As a matter of fact, when I sent the book to my brother and my sister-in-law, she said he opened the package and said, "She's written a book about our family's life." But then she came back and said, "I can see you combined people." And I did. I took bits and pieces of interesting people and then my characters came to life, and I just followed them.*

MS: So, at what point in your life did you –you were doing something else, I'm assuming—at what point did you say "I think I have a novel in me. I want to write this."

KH: *I had always wanted to be a writer. I came to New York at 21 and thought that was what I was going to be. I met my husband at a poetry reading in Manhattan, and then we ran the poetry reading together. That was a heady time; I studied with some great poets. Then the two of us decided to have careers and a family. So, while I dabbled with writing over the next 30-40 years, I never got to it. When I had a chance to retire early, I finally had time, and I really wanted to do this. That was about seven years ago, and I have been writing ever since.*

MS: And this particular novel, how long did it take you to write?

KH: *Well, I started with short stories. I had a lot of catch up to do. Things had changed. All of a sudden, you don't put two spaces after a period. I had to re-educate myself. But two years into it, my sister-in-law mentioned NANOWRIMO and I thought that was a challenge, writing 50,000 words in a month. So, I sat down and started with some of my own experiences. I did outline, but I had never written a novel or even tried to write a novel before. I'd had some success with the short stories, but I set out to do this novel. That was the origin of Real Estate.*

MS: What did you find the hardest about writing a novel versus short stories?

KH: *I had to learn that. while I do outline, there had to be an underlying dramatic arc. You had to have a theme. Pulling it all together. Once I started writing a novel, I loved it. I loved world building. I loved the fact that your characters come to life and you're just running to catch up.*

MS: You sound like you're a pantsier for the most part, even though I do hear some plotting and outlining in there, but your characters surprised you with some things they came up with?

KH: *Absolutely. They come to life and I'm just keeping up. I love the process of writing.*

MS: What surprised you the most that came out of the novel that you weren't expecting?

KH: *What happened is that I started with stuff in my life. I worked with a developmental editor. I had this very messy first draft, and I started pulling out things as I realized I was not the interesting person. The people around me were the story I wanted to tell. That's when I got into heavy duty research. So, it wasn't the novel I set out to write. Harriet became the protagonist. With every single draft, she took it over.*

MS: So, Harriet wasn't you. You were in the novel to begin with, or a character that seemed like they were you?

KH: *Right.*

MS: Who was your favorite character?

KH: *The tech whiz was fun to write. To be able to take little things from the events that happened during that time and play with them was fun.*

MS: And is that something that you did actual research by going to places, going to libraries, just talking to the people you knew... Or did you have enough experience from having lived through those times?

KH: *As in the process of writing two other historical novels, I spent tons of time on the internet. I spent a year reading newspapers from 1900 Oregon for my second novel. For this novel, I read all the newspapers, I pulled up the real estate ads, I read contemporary literature from the time. So it was mostly on the internet, although I know the area personally.*

MS: You don't live in California any more?

KH: *No, I don't. I do have family there.*

MS: What does Harriet, as the major character, have to overcome? How is she different at the beginning of the novel from the end of the novel?

KH: *She comes from a very dysfunctional family—her father is flying off and leaving the family alone, her mother doesn't speak any English—Harriet's put in charge of raising her siblings. She was forced to grow up very young. The second thing that came out, as I developed her character, was the story of a woman learning to claim her own life, her own identity.*

MS: I was going to ask you about the themes in your book. That was one of them, obviously. Were there any other themes that you felt came out through the book?

KH: *Yes, how history, how location, how family expectations shape people's lives. That's where I started.*

MS: Was there a character that you found difficult to write or that you struggled with?

KH: *Actually, as Harriet evolved, and I got emotionally involved with her whole story, some of the first feedback I got was that she was just so sad. Who would want to read this? Giving her a*

spark, giving her some life was a learning process. I did it by giving her a love of music in addition to some of the harder things she had to face.

MS: Yes, because it is one thing to get that feedback. And another to figure out how you are going to do it.

KH: *Right.*

MS: And the character of her mother? That person is not a major character because she is not speaking.....

KH: She actually is important because she is in kind of a strange marriage which colors her expectations of Harriet. When Harriet gets involved with Bobby, she is the one who is horrified because her whole life was transformed when she got involved with Harriet's father.

MS: And so she is against that relationship.

KH: *Horrified.*

MS: You described writing short stories first and then this book, and I am curious as to whether you belonged to a writing group during the process of writing this book.

KH: Yes, I have a long-term generative writing group. Once a week, we meet and they certainly followed this through from beginning to end. And I also now have a novel-writing group. We meet once a week and do 10 pages of each other's novels. I feel like I'm as much writing their novels as mine. It's a very helpful exercise.

MS: I found that being in a writing group and writing a novel was sometimes difficult in that not everybody showed up every week.

KH: My novel group did not miss a week during the entire pandemic. We did it via Zoom. It was only recently that life intervened, and we missed a week.

MS: You sound like you've got the novel writing bug, because you've referred to a couple of other books you've started writing.

KH: For a while there I was doing NANOWRIMO every year and coming out with a draft. Then I had to put the drafts to work. I have one more that I am now shopping, and a third that is going through major transformation.

MS: Yeah, because NANOWRIMO is almost around the corner. Here you go again.

Kathryn Reads from the Novel

MS: I love how that character just comes alive. He's very scientific. "Number one." The only thing I thought of was the earthquake, but he's got like five different things.

So now you've finished the book. Did you say that you went to a developmental editor or is that just now you're doing that?

KH: I reworked the first draft. Every summer I attend the Green Mountain Writers Conference, something that has been a wonderful experience, a wonderful group of people, very supportive. And one of the people who taught there was Elizabeth Rossner, a novelist. I asked her to do a developmental edit. We did two rounds together, and she taught me how to put a novel together.

MS: Alright, so now you have it in good shape. Did you go out to agents, directly to publishers? What did you do?

KH: I tried sending it out to agents with absolutely no response. That has been kind of my experience with all my work. I get interest from small publishers. I don't think I am writing what agents are looking for.

MS: So you went to small presses after that

KH: I went to small presses. In a relatively short period of time I heard back from Propertius Press. They asked for more pages. And eventually, with spaces in between everything, they said they were interested in publishing it and set a 2020 publishing date. They are a small press in Virginia, lovely publisher, very personal. I got a fair contract. Very exciting. However, they set a 2020 publishing date, and I didn't know at the time what that meant.

MS: Nobody did. Yes, you were in the middle of the pandemic, weren't you.

KH. Absolutely. What happened was, as the pandemic unwound, they kept pushing back the date a little but they kept to 2020 and now I wish they had put it off. By September they assigned an editor who did a very nice line edit and they set a Black Friday release date. We were going back and forth on the cover but they came up with a cover which I wasn't really pleased with because it didn't look like California but it was a professional looking cover so I put that up on my social media so I could announce it was coming out. All of this I was doing from my cabin in Vermont. I hadn't seen anybody in six months except for my husband. So the week it's supposed to come out, in November as things were getting really tense around the pandemic the publisher calls and says, "You know what, they hate the cover." They spent that week re-doing the cover and coming up with one, two days I think before the release. So one of my experiences was that I put up a cover on social media that wasn't the book I released.

MS: Oh my goodness. Wow. So the cover we see on Amazon...

KH: That was the final cover. Eventually I got it all changed. Then, right about then, the post office fell apart. Although I got my author's copies, all the people I'd rallied, my writing community, my family, my former boss from Manhattan, all ordered the book, all excited to read it, they got the book two months later.

MS: So after Christmas actually.

KH: *Yes, because it got lost in all the Christmas mail. There was an e-copy available, so some people read it, but I kept getting e-mails: "So where is your book?"*

MS: All the worst things that could happen and you're just sitting there with no control.

KH: *Not at all. Except the excitement. I had published the book.*

MS: It's somewhere. There's a book somewhere. So you've had it out now for seven months. You did eventually get the book out into the hands of people who had bought it.

KH: *By January they were saying they had gotten their books. So somewhere around then I discovered the Women's Fiction Writers Association, which has been another wonderful tool. I took a lot of their webinars. Only to discover that my publisher releases sales information on an annual basis, so I was getting no feedback on what was selling. So I did a campaign on Goodreads and I put Amazon ads up, never knowing what was working.*

MS: You didn't have any analytics to go back to and say this is working and I'm going to do more of this.

KH, *Yes, that was my second frustration.*

MS: And did you talk to your publisher about this? And they just said that was the way it is?

KH: *I tried.*

MS: OK

KH. *But I want to add here that they were lovely, she was lovely. I am in very good company there. The other books they published at the time were very impressive and I was very pleased to be included. I did wish they had pushed the release date back to the next fiscal year. Because so many of the contests, even this and the Women's Fiction Writers group are all done by calendar year and my book had only been out five weeks by then, with these other things going on, and all of a sudden it's old stuff.*

MS: It's tricky because you don't necessarily control your publication date and, like you said, there were all sorts of other things going on. Not to mention the pandemic and Christmas and the postal service. And the election.

KH: *Right, right on top of the election too.*

MS: Your book getting out was probably very low on the list. But you haven't lost heart and you are still continuing to market it, it sounds like.

KH: *I am. I love reading. I love writing. I have problems with the whole push that I should be a brand. It doesn't come naturally. I'm not a salesperson, so all I can do is share it in the ways I am comfortable with. I have my first book club scheduled, and I'll be off to a conference at the end of the month. I do what I can.*

MS: So you're not a social media person. You're not on Instagram every day.

KH: *I do have an Instagram account. But no, it is not how I live.*

MS: And books live forever. We act as if the month they are released, is all that matters. If they don't sell then they don't sell. That's not true. I read things that came out two or three years ago.

KH: I actually have two chapbooks of short stories which I published through Amazon, and one of the delights is the little tiny checks I get every quarter.

MS: I was going to ask you that. Have you gotten reader feedback? Either through book clubs, through appearances, or just knowing people who read it.

KH *I have. I have some very nice reviews up on Amazon and Goodreads. Because I didn't get out Advance Reader Copies, I don't have any critical reviews or from other publications.*

MS: Well, let's hear a little bit about you as a writer. You talked about being retired so I assume you are

KH: *I spend my summers in a wonderful, rural town. One of my chapbooks is about all the quirky people there. The highlight of my writing so far was when I read at the public library there and all the locals showed up. I looked at them and I thought: "What have I gotten myself into?" And they loved it.*

MS: Were they looking at each other and saying, "I think that sounds like you."

KH: *It was more like. "I know who that is." It was lots of fun.*

MS: Do you write every day? Are you one of these people who has a set routine, a set time, a set place.

KH: *At the end of my career, I was one of those lucky people working from home. I really had to fight to get that arrangement. I moved up from the city and worked another ten years up here. So I would wake up in the morning and say to my dog, "Come on, we have to go upstairs and go to work." So when I retired, I still said to the dog "Come upstairs," and I would write every morning.*

MS: And do you have a set work count you are trying to hit or is it the time?

KH: *It's just the time.*

MS: Do you have any special rituals that you go over, like I have a candle that I light. It doesn't help me write, but it is a ritual that says "Now it is time to write."

KH: *I definitely use prompts sometimes when I am stuck. To get going. But mainly it's a matter of sitting down and starting to write.*

MS: Well, you have a once-a-week writers' group that you have to produce ten pages for.

KH: *Exactly. That keeps me moving along. And then I have to rewrite the ten pages from the previous week.*

MS: There's that too. And then you have to read their pages, right? To critique it?

KH: *Absolutely.*

MS: What kind of books do you like to read?

KH: *I've always read contemporary literary fiction. I like to read all the prize winners. I've always been a voracious reader. I have never read historical fiction and everything I have written so far has been historic. Partially because I find stories that I can take off from.*

MS: It's funny to me to think of the 1960s as being historical fiction, because I usually think of history as 1900 or something. But I am hearing a lot more from suspense writers, all kinds of writers, talking about how it is nice to go back a little way before there were cell phones. Because so much could be solved, particularly in suspense writing, by saying "Why don't you pick up the phone and tell him that" as opposed to "I can't pick up the phone because there is no phone." So I think some of the technology, even from the 1960s when there were no computers, it's hard to imagine what that was like, even though it doesn't really feel like it was that long ago.

KH: *Well, one of the big research things I had to do was to be sure I got my technology dates right. What stage were computers in? What were they building? One of things I realized was that things evolved slowly. It was really the 90s before we all lived on the internet, long after this story ends.*

MS: So it must have been difficult for people to find out things, even to communicate with each other. Now, young people communicate almost exclusively through their devices.

Well, now we've come to the end of the broadcast and we want to hear something quirky about you, Kathryn. So what have you picked to tell us.

KH: *I queried my family. I think of myself as quirky, but nothing came to mind. My son came up with two things—and I don't either is quirky—that the police in Spain arrested me when there was still a fascist government, and that I have been doing power yoga since i's inception. But I'm going to go with what my husband suggested which is that I talk to anything. I talk to animals; I talk to plants; I talk to furniture. If I'm weeding, I'm explaining to the weeds that I have nothing against them. They just weren't invited to this party. That's kinda how I do things.*

MS: And does your husband turn around and say "What did you say?" and you say, "I'm not talking to you . I'm talking to the weeds."

KH: *Yes, I do have to say "I'm not talking to you."*

MS: That is a little quirky, but it's good for character development. Thank you for being on the podcast. What is the name of your next book, or the next two books you are working on?

KH: *The next one which I hope will come out in the next year or two is The Cost of Electricity, and the third one which is undergoing a complete transformation is called Granted.*

MS: The Cost of Electricity. What time period is that set in?

KH: *Oregon in 1904. at the inception of electricity. And Granted is set in Nova Scotia in the 1760s.*

MS: Oh, way back. That's interesting. Well, thank you so much for being on. It was a pleasure talking to you.