The BiblioFiles: Christine Kendall

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents the BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi. This is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is Christine Kendall, author of *Riding Chance*, and her newest novel, *The True Definition of Neva Beane*.

*Riding Chance* is the story of Troy Butler, an at-risk youth who is struggling with the death of his mother, the sadness of his father, and getting into trouble. Troy's life changes profoundly when his social worker enrolls him in a prevention program that teaches him how to work with horses and play polo. Inspired by the real-life organization Work to Ride in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, *Riding Chance* is an incredible story about trust, grief, reconciliation, and finding your flow.

In *The True Definition of Neva Beane*, we meet 12-year-old Neva. Always full of questions, Neva finds herself facing some deeply personal ones as she grapples with changes in her life, including her developing body, her relationship with her friend Jamila, her family, and her growing political awareness.

Kendall is especially talented at inviting her readers in like friends and family. Her dialogue, descriptions, and pacing are so natural, the reading experience feels more like a conversation as her characters share their neighborhoods, relationships, inner thoughts, and conflicts.

All the while, Kendall asks us to think deeply about the myriad of issues she presents. Racial identity, police profiling, social justice, family difficulties. It makes for a deeply personal and enlightening read.

A nominee for the NAACP Image Award, Kendall is an active member of the literary community, including being a juror for the New York City Book Awards and Co-Curator and Host of the award-winning reading series, Creative at the Cannery. Christine Kendall, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.
DR. DANA: Both books take place in Philadelphia, and you live there as well. For listeners who haven't been to Philly, can you describe your city?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yes. Philadelphia is a fun city, somewhat obsessed with sports. It's a place where you can be your natural self. I lived in Philadelphia between the time that I was five and 11, and then my family moved to the New Jersey suburbs. I came back to Philadelphia as an adult, but spent some time, maybe 20 years in New York City. I returned to Philadelphia. I've been back here 10 years now, and I'm loving it. It's much more manageable than other places. It's got a great restaurant scene. And people are very much themselves.

DR. DANA: So Riding Chance was your first novel. In the author's note, you said you were inspired to write about it after hearing about the Work to Ride program. Can you tell us a little bit more about the program and how your novel emerged from it?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Oh, yes. I had a long corporate career, and I decided I wanted to do something more creative. And I was going to write children's picture books. So I was at home, by myself, working on picture books.

One morning, I heard this interview on – not an interview – a program on NPR about this Work to Ride program in Fairmount Park. It's a program where kids who had no prior exposure to horses were in the park, learning how to ride horses. And they had a polo team which actually won a polo championship in 2011. And I thought that was phenomenal, that these kids who had no prior exposure to horses or the sport won this national championship.

So I got up, and I did some research, and I found a photo of one of the kids in the program. And that just did it for me. I put my picture books aside, and I took this picture that I had found online and put it in a drawer, not knowing what I was going to do with it or if I was ever going to use it. But a few months after that, I went to a writing program, and the instructor asked everyone to bring a copy of a photo that's something that had touched their heart. So there's no question for me. I pulled that photo out. I went to the writing workshop, and that's where I started writing this novel, not even knowing that I could write a novel.

DR. DANA: Did you do a lot of research? Did you go to the barn and get on a polo pony?

[LAUGHS]
CHRISTINE KENDALL: I didn't know what I had jumped into. And so it took me a year to write the first draft of the book. And I shared it with the workshop instructor who happened to be an editor at Scholastic who was coaching me. And she said, “oh, I love the voice here, but I need more horse.” And I said, “oh. I don't - I don't know any more.” She said, “you've got to get on a horse. You have to do your research.”

So I did go to the park, and I walked around the stables there. But no one was there the day that I went. But I just started getting the feeling of what it smells like, what it looks like. Then I did a whole lot of research. I read many, many, many books. My husband and I started going to polo games. And then [LAUGHS] I actually was lucky enough. I found a polo player who allowed me to interview him.

So it took me three years to write the book, and most of that time was spent doing all this research, because I was so worried about getting it right.

DR. DANA: Speaking as a rider myself, you got it right.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Oh, thank you.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHS] Including that love and companionship that you feel with a horse, which Troy absolutely does.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: That was a wonderful experience. And again, I didn't realize that I could write a novel. So I was learning a lot about myself as I was writing the book.

DR. DANA: Troy goes through significant amounts of pain in the story. His mother has died, he's gotten into some trouble with his friends, and he's subject to police violence. How did it feel to take your character through these experiences, and how did you navigate his narrative?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yeah, that's a very good question. My own mother had recently passed away shortly before I started writing this book, so I think maybe I was still thinking about that and grieving myself as I was writing Troy's story. And I didn't necessarily plan for him to have that encounter with the police, that stop and frisk situation, but I wanted it to be a true story about a young urban youth's experience. And sadly, stop and frisk is very much an issue here in
Philadelphia and other major cities as well. So I was looking for experiences for Troy to have in the book. And sadly, I ended up in that stop and frisk scene. And I had a very hard time writing it. I really did.

DR. DANA: It's interesting. You could have ended the story with a triumphant polo match, but you didn't. Without giving too much away, Troy actually ends the story injured, but he is not in a weak place. Did you always intend for the story to go that way?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yeah. I began the book – initially in my first draft, I had Troy in a hospital bed, and I had him telling the story from the hospital bed. And then after the first draft, I started thinking about that and realized I didn't like that framing. I didn't want to have him in that hospital bed.

So I removed that, but I always knew that he was going to end up injured. But he was going to end up somewhat physically injured, but not in any way permanently damaged. But in terms of his spirit, he was going to be much stronger, and he was going to be surrounded by the love of his community.

DR. DANA: Switching to your most recent novel, *The True Definition of Neva Beane*, it begins with a Marianne Williamson quote, which is, "Our deepest fear is not that we are adequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." Can you tell us what that quote means to you, and why you selected it?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yes. I think that very often – and I'm going to speak about women now and young girls – very often, we know we have some power within us, but we're afraid to express it. And I think that's very much Neva's issue in the book. She knows that she's beautiful. She knows that she's smart. But something is holding her back from claiming her power. So when I found this Marianne Williamson quote, I thought, oh, that's it. That's really this book in a nutshell. This is this young girl, claiming her power.

DR. DANA: And she's so curious, lively, thoughtful, and real. So, how did she emerge to you as a character?
CHRISTINE KENDALL: Well, [LAUGHS] that's a very good question. The inspiration for this book actually came from the memory of something that happened to me when I was a young girl. *Star Trek* came on TV when I was about 11 years old, and I loved Lieutenant Uhura. I love the way she looked. I loved the fact that she was there on the bridge. I loved her position. I loved her black leather boots.

But I also loved her profile, her figure. I had just started wearing a bra myself, and I looked at Lieutenant Uhura, admiring her. And no one ever spoke about her profile, but I was looking at that.

And so I would very often run to the mirror several times a day to check myself out in the mirror. So that scene in the beginning of the book, the mirror scene that Neva experiences, actually happened to me. And then –

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Oh.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Right. So maybe over all these years, I was holding on to that trying to figure it out. So Neva's story is not my story. This is not an autobiography. This is fiction. But the book was inspired based on that one thing that happened to me when I was an 11-year-old girl.

DR. DANA: And you grew up in a very large family, correct?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yes, there were six of us.

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: There's no privacy.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Well, no, no privacy.

DR. DANA: [LAUGHS]
CHRISTINE KENDALL: And I realized I wasn't doing anything wrong, but I was seen by another person at a very private moment, a moment where I was affirming myself. And I felt badly about that, but I never thought I was wrong. So I wanted Neva to experience that, and I wanted her throughout the course of this book to understand what was happening there.

DR. DANA: I mentioned in the intro that you have an incredible ability to draw the reader into communities, characters, and feelings. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to read a passage that demonstrates this.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Oh, yes, absolutely.

DR. DANA: I'll introduce the passage by saying that Neva is going to a political meeting. It's her first, and she is unsure what to expect.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Right. OK.

"The community center is in a church a few blocks away on Baltimore Avenue. I'm walking alongside Mrs. Giles, and she's very chatty even when she's stepping over the uneven sidewalks. I didn't know she was born and raised here in West Philly.

'I've been here so long I can remember a time when these tree roots weren't growing all up through the pavement,' she laughs. Walking through the neighborhood with her is like walking with royalty.

Royalty: people of royal blood or status; the most successful, famous, or highly regarded members of a particular group.

Everybody knows Mrs. Giles.

'I try to do what I can with my hiring at the swim club,' she says, 'but it's not nearly enough. There's been such a lack of investment in our community for so long.'

I nod as we continue along and walk right up to a woman sweeping her sidewalk. She holds her broom still and rubs Mrs. Giles's arm as she looks down at me.
'This has to be Tracey Beane's daughter. Looks just like her.'

'Isn't she something? She's always been so sharp,' says Mrs Giles. She shines her electric-lightbulb smile on me again even though she's doing that adult thing I don't understand. Talking about me like I'm not standing right here.

*Sharp* is what she called me. Is that what I am?

We walk the rest of the way over to the center with me sorting through all the words I keep in my head. But the one I need right now to describe myself doesn't seem to be there.

Anton and another teenager stand outside the community center handing out flyers and encouraging people to come inside. He looks down at the pavement when he sees me, but hands a flyer to Mrs. Giles. 'I have more than I need already,' she says, lifting her tote bag to show him. 'But don't forget about Neva.'

Anton stammers something I can't hear and hands me about five fliers, way more than I need. He doesn't look directly at me but I can feel his eyes on my back as I pass.

Me and Mrs. Giles step out of the bright sunshine into the cool cavern of the church. It's dimmer in here than it is outside, but that doesn't stamp out the energy coming from all the people sitting on folding chairs and talking. A man who looks like Michelle hands Mrs. Giles a pamphlet and then gives me another copy of the March for Justice flyer. Is this Michelle's daddy, Mr. Overton?

At first I think this is just one big meeting but it's actually a bunch of smaller meetings going on in this one huge room. Mrs. Giles takes it all in before another man waves her over to the group talking about jobs. She gestures for me to sit down with her, but I see Michelle over in the corner with a group of older kids.

'That's the Youth Committee,' the man says. 'Go on over, if you want.'

Michelle's back is to me so she doesn't see me walk over but she's definitely the one in charge. Even some adults are leaning over to listen.
'Sunday's march isn't about any one issue,' she says. 'It's about all the things impacting our community – immigration, jobs, affordable housing…'

I look around to check out the other kids. Lots of cool piercings and tattoos but nobody cares about how anybody looks. There's something else going on here. It feels like…like electricity.

Yeah. There's an electric current that I can almost see jumping from person to person. And it doesn't skip over me either. It races up my spine and guides my eyes up to the top of the church's tall stone walls. All the way up to the stained glass windows that spread the outside light so it falls back onto the church floor in smooth, colorful patterns. The light is beautiful. Just like Michelle."

DR. DANA: Thank you. There are so many layers of community in this passage, from the walk to the church, the people they talk to along the way, the different groups at the meeting, to this electric current in the room. I'm curious how you go about creating this community and then bringing your reader into the community.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Hmm. Well, this community is very much a reflection of the West Philadelphia neighborhood where I live. It's a very progressive neighborhood, and people are politically aware and active, and there are flyers all over the community looking for volunteers for various movements and organizations. So it wasn't necessarily hard for me to conjure that up. But I also am impressed by how people interact in the neighborhood. There are a bazillion block parties during the summer. And it really is a neighborhood where people care for one another and look out for one another. So I guess it was pretty easy. It was all there. And for me as a writer to just describe what I know about this community wasn't a difficult thing to do.

DR. DANA: And I love the idea of time being measured by tree roots in the sidewalk.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And there are a lot of sidewalks here that are buckling because of the tree roots. [LAUGHS]

DR. DANA: In the book, Neva is also coming to terms with her body. She observes changes to her body and other girls' bodies in the neighborhood with this admirable frankness. She also observes the impact her body has on people around her.
But the most beautiful part is the developing pride Neva feels for her physical self. There are plenty of novels that follow an emotional journey of a character, but not too many that also explore this physical journey. And can you talk a little bit more about how you approached this with Neva?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Yes. I knew from the beginning that Neva was feeling good about herself and proud of her developing body. But, once I started writing the book, I did some research about young girls and puberty, and I learned that very often, even a child who may have been very confident when they were younger, when they hit puberty, something happens and they lose that confidence that they had.

So this also happens with boys, but it's far more the case with girls. And in the book, I had Neva be sort of very insecure about her changing body. Even though she likes it, it's a very confusing time. [LAUGHS] And so I wanted to get that confusion out there.

And she has fun with her friend Jamila at points, dancing and being proud of themselves, but at other moments she feels much less secure about it. And I think this isn't an unusual thing. And I wanted to really bring that forth in the book, for her to be confused about it, but to realize in the end that she's magnificent.

And also, a thing I wanted to bring out was that your body is always changing. I don't want to give the book away, but there are other characters in the story who are going through some physical changes. And they realize as the story is going on that they're changing. Their body will never be what it was in the past. And it's a realization for Neva to see that, hmm, she's not the only one experiencing this. Everyone does over the course of their life.

DR. DANA: So can you tell us what you're working on now?

CHRISTINE KENDALL: I'm working on another middle grade novel, and I'm not quite sure of where it's going to go. [LAUGHS] But I wrote a short story a few years ago about two eight-year-old boys who are twins, and one of them gets suspended – gets unfairly suspended from school. So I'm trying to figure out, what is the story if I develop this into a longer piece?
DR. DANA: Christine Kendall, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

CHRISTINE KENDALL: Thank you. It really was a pleasure.

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