S3 E10: *Even As We Breathe* author (and mountain biker) Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle

ASC: I am Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle.

So I grew up in Cherokee, North Carolina—technically in Qualla, North Carolina. Since I'm talking to you guys I can be more specific than I can other places. And I live really, I don't know, just down the hill from the house that I grew up in. So, I grew up in Qualla right off the Qualla Boundary, right outside of Cherokee. And I went to Jackson County Public Schools—Smoky Mountain Elementary School, Smoky Mountain High School. And after I graduated from high school, I went to Yale University for my undergraduate degree in American Studies and I also got my teaching license in English while I was there. And then went on to the College of William & Mary for my Master's degree. And when I finished that, I came back home to Cherokee and have been here ever since.

A lot of people work their whole lives to retire to Western North Carolina, so why don't I just start out? But I mean, there's a lot of truth in that. It's a beautiful place. There's a richness and a complexity that doesn't feel boring to me. I feel like there's still so much to explore here, even though I've been here for 40 years. And you know, it's a place I want my kids to grow up in and be a part of this community. You know, family's important to us as well. I'm fortunate that there are enough opportunities for me here—that wasn't necessarily always true for everyone, so you know, to be able to work here and have a job. But also, as a writer and someone who wants to be connected with the rest of the world, because of technology, we can still do that here to a large extent. I mean, I would like faster internet, but *laughter* we're doing alright.

Kami Ahrens: What was it like growing up here?

ASC: You know, I just remember being outside all the time. My parents ran gift shops in Cherokee, and so I would spend summers in the river behind the gift shop with my brother and cousins and other kids that had parents who worked in that area. I'd be in the woods behind our house all the time. You know, I am so afraid of snakes now, but I must not have been when I was little 'cause we were all over the place. You know, I just remember being outside when I was a kid. And you know, we would go to Tennessee, you know, across the mountain, was a big vacation for, you know, amusement parks and things. Or we'd go to Asheville and go shopping. But, that's about it.

KA: Do you think those years outside and your childhood shaped how you see the world around you and how you interact and observe things?

ASC: Absolutely, it's a place that I'm very comfortable in. I have adult friends who didn't grow up like that and they're very afraid of outside, but it's probably where I'm less afraid. I'm more comfortable in the woods. I'm more comfortable in finding answers out in nature. You know, not in some kind of weird magical way but just, you know, being able to kind of still my own mind and pay attention to what's going on in the world around me. And you know, now I mountain bike so I think I feel, I think that it connects me to that youthful feeling to be out in the woods now. It just reminds me of how free it was to be a kid out in the woods. You know, it's exciting too, there's a little bit of danger. So, yeah I think it's my go-to if I'm stuck with a decision or something I'm writing, you know, to get outside as quickly as possible.

KA: Awesome, how long have you been mountain biking?

ASC: Just about 4 years now. I started mountain biking, let's see, I was the executive director at the Cherokee Preservation Foundation and we had a planning grant come through for our mountain trail system in Cherokee. And I was at this point in my life where I just had my youngest son and trying to get off the weight and I was in this new director position and just felt really stuck in a lot of ways. I'd been a life-long athlete but wasn't feeling very athletic at the moment. And the planning grant came through and as I talked to the folks involved with the trails, the more and more I talked about the cycling community and what mountain biking was it really interested me and to know that Cherokee was going to have this world class trail system in our backyard seemed like a great opportunity to at least give it a try. So I rented a bike a couple of times before you make *that* kind of investment and just fell in love with it—absolutely fell in love with it. It's—I have, my knees and ankles are shot from years of basketball, so cycling's been great for that. I'm just completely obsessed now, it's not good probably how much I love it.

KA: Can you tell me a little bit about your time with the Cherokee Preservation Foundation?

AC: Sure, so I had been teaching for a few years at Swain County High School when I heard that the executive director was leaving the preservation foundation. She was the founding director, had been there ten years. And you know, it was a great opportunity to work for the Cherokee community in a broad way. I feel like I've always done that work in a classroom or in the chief's office when I worked there, but it was a way to connect Western North Carolina at large with the Eastern Band and the preservation foundation focuses on cultural preservation, environmental preservation, and economic development—all areas that, you know, I'm passionate about. And so it was an opportunity for me to help lead this organization in its next phase, you know. It had gotten rooted in Western North Carolina and in the foundation world, and I think they were looking for what is the vision from Cherokee—Eastern Band specifically. And was able to have the opportunity to be able to do that. But I—woo, I missed teaching. I miss that, you know, nitty-gritty ground-level work of teaching and the energy that surrounds that. So, I mean, I will complain about teaching every other day probably, but the truth is that, you know, I left a job where I was paid far more and worked far less to go back to teaching.

Lilly Knoepp: I know you talked a little bit in one of your previous interviews—I was listening to when you were on the State of Things and just about how important you felt like education is to be a part of, that that was something you really learned in college and wanting to give that back.

AC: Yeah, sure, so actually I was just speaking to a Yale Alumni group about this topic. When I went to visit Yale after I had been accepted, I still have a very vivid memory of standing on campus with my mom and we were talking to the director of the teacher prep program there and my mom asked him, "Why in the world would somebody come to Yale to be a teacher?" I think what she meant was why in the world would somebody pay this tuition then become a teacher. But he had the best answer. He said, “You know, when you are gifted with a world-class education, the best thing you can do with it is give it back and share it with other people.” And I really took that to heart. And you know, I really think that’s true, whether you’re talking an Ivy league education or just some real—how to make a certain recipe, right—there’s no point in keeping that to yourself. That’s really a loss. And, you know, the way that knowledge is traditionally passed in Cherokee culture is almost a mentorship. It’s, you know, I know a lot of people want to be able to pick up a book and know how all of our ceremonies work or how medicines work, but that’s not actually how it’s done. It needs to be a mentorship process. So I value education in that way. In that mentorship, in that, you know, being with someone and teaching someone and sharing that knowledge with them individually. And you know, so I try to do that in the classroom but I also think writing is a way to do that. That storytelling kind of mentorship that we can do. In Cherokee culture, education has always been incredibly important. It wasn’t something that was new to us when Europeans came to—so you know, and my family’s always valued it. both sides of my family—my mom’s side too. My, you know the women on both sides of my family have always been advocates of education. And you, I have great-grandmothers who have college degrees and worked outside of the house and it’s just kind of in my DNA now.

LK: You’ve mentioned this a little bit, like talking about opportunity and region—I’m from Franklin and so I grew up here, and you know, a lot of people leave and don’t come back. Especially, how do you talk about opportunity in the region, especially, I feel like you’ve thought about this a lot from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation, you know, economic development perspective of what it is that people are trying to bring back to the region.

AC: Sure, yeah, and it’s, you know, often we think of how many jobs are available. But I think it’s bigger than that. We have more opportunity in terms of what we can create based on the assets that we have without, you know, sacrificing those assets. So it’s always a balance. But, you know, we have, one of the most important aspects, in my opinion, for a healthy economy is a creative community, a community that values work, that has fought for survival—and I’m not just talking the Cherokee population in Western North Carolina—I’m talking about pretty much everybody. And so you really have the baseline for building an economy that matches our value system. And I think if we can do that, we can continue to grow with new opportunities for, whether it be big business or small business. Certainly in the immediate, in the gaming industry that came in via the tribe was an economic boost and it changed everything (15:04). It changed things in ways that people might not have expected. I think there was a big fear that there would be crime and all those things that came in, but what we did was reinvest in our cultural attractions in a more authentic way. We, you know, put more money into environmentally sustainable practices. And so thinking about business in a sense that is responsible to the value system of a community is important. And I think we can do that and we’re heading in that direction. From the tribe’s perspective specifically, I know we’re really on the edge of, or precipice is probably a better word, of our outdoor economy and what we can do to kind of help lead the charge in that direction. You know, back to the Fire Mountain Trail System is, you know, an example of, “Oh, we can be really successful with something like this.” It’s not a new building, it’s not gaming, and it shows that we can partner with other organizations across western North

Carolina who have like-minded values in this area. So, I think the future of the economy in Western North Carolina is something that we don't know the answer to, but we have to continue to invest in creative minds and utilize what our strengths already are, instead of try to copy what somebody else is doing somewhere else. That doesn't tend to work.

KA: Do you think that Cherokee is beginning to really develop a successful model for you know what life on—and obviously Qualla is not a reservation—but you know on tribal lands, could look like?

AC: Right, yeah, we've had opportunities that other tribes have not had, so it's hard to compare, but it is a model. I mean we have taken our, the resources we do have available and I feel like maximized them. Certainly with gaming, but you know, we have got to diversify or it's not gonna look so great in a few years, you know. But we have invested in different ways. You know, I think, I spent some time writing about the tribe's approach to covid for example. Man, that is a model not just for other tribes but for the United States of this America, you know. The way in which our tribe built these teams of health care providers and the hospital staff, the community volunteers and community-rooted programs, and government officials (18:12). Just, it doesn't happen other places because other places aren't set up like the tribe's. So where you might have a hospital system that is profit-oriented, we don't. And so our hospital has no problem partnering with public health to deliver testing or to do contact-tracing, those kinds of things. And I'll get off on a tangent talking about covid response, because it fascinates me, but that's an example really of you know where the tribe has stepped up and really is a model. A lot of times people do think of our economy as a model, and it certainly is, so far, but we, you know, we had opportunities because of our location that other tribes don't have. And I think probably our response to covid is a better example of how we've used, just, a different worldview to approach problems.

KA: I was gonna say do you see those responses as a reflection of your, you know, cultural traditions?

AC: Absolutely, right, it's about community health. And you know profit will never supersede community health. It just can't. so, and it's just, it's taking a problem and kind of turning it on its head and looking at a different angle for approaching it. and not feeling like we're locked into a system that somebody else is doing. And you know, we did things differently than the state told us to do. We exercised our sovereignty in that way and that is always a risk. But it proved to be the right decision.

KA: Do you see that your Cherokee students are connecting closely with those traditional values? Has there been success in bringing it back to the classroom?

AC: You know I think the age of the students that I work with, I'm seeing it a little bit more. Not in huge numbers, but there is some interest. And more so, it's more just acceptable. You know, it's not, if someone has some sort of traditional knowledge or you know artistic talent in a traditional art form, they don't hide it as much. People appreciate—students appreciate that work more. And it's interesting, it's like, I think that it's important that it is a movement that is more accepting of everybody trying to learn. You know, like maybe you did not grow up in a household that taught those things, so you know, there's a process for learning and you make mistakes. And this generation, I don't know how large I expand that generation, but you know, Dakota's age up to my age, is just more accepting of us all trying to figure it out together and work to revitalize those traditions and learn from each other, whereas just a couple of generations older than me, you know, that is an alternative to a successful life. That is, none of that is going to help you be financially stable and things like that. It's a different way of looking at it. and then also you know, I think especially if you think of things like language, there used to be trepidation about trying to learn the language, 'cause what if you got it wrong and somebody would be like, "Oh, you're not saying that right." And there's lots of disagreements with how you use the language, but I think that's changed. And it's just more relaxed, open approach to learning our culture that I think is really healthy and more sustainable.

KA: Do you think that some of the hesitations that were put in place by the boarding school and some of the structures are finally starting to ease off then?

AC: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, of course, you know, boarding schools are gone, but offering—the switch from boarding schools eliminating native languages to now even our public schools offering native language. UNC system accepts those credits as a—which is ironic—a "foreign" language credit. Whatever that means. You know, so I think that has gone by the wayside.

KA: So you mentioned a lot of women in your life, do you have a specific mentor that shared Cherokee cultural values with you? 'Cause I know, traditionally, Cherokee is a matrilineal society. Was that evident to you growing up as a child?

AC: No, I didn't have that kind of experience, in terms of passing down that kind of traditional cultural knowledge. But I will say, I guess it depends on how you define cultural knowledge because my grandmother—my dad's mother—was a council woman for over 25 years. Very well respected in our community as a political leader but she was not a, well, if you've read the book, she's not Lishie. She's not like this, you know, a sweeter kind of grandmother figure. She was powerful. And I've learned a lot from that kind of Cherokee woman—which I guess is in a lot of ways cultural knowledge, but it's not the language. It's not like basketry or anything. It's just a different kind of aspect to our community. So there's a, one of my favorite stories about her is that, and I don't know that this is true, but she was in Bryson City and standing on one side of the street and another councilmember—a man—was walking on the other and she just kind of raised her chin in a nod, like of recognition, and he shot his hand up as if he were voting in council because that's what he would do normally when she nodded at him. So I don't know if that's true, but that was kind of her image. But you know she also used to bake cakes for raffles to raise money for families and you know people will always tell me that she gave away any money she had to help people out. And I always remember her cooking and baking. I can still smell her kitchen. She passed away when I was 13.

LK: You talked a little bit about—or we have, I know it's on our list—is talking about Appalachian identity as well as Cherokee and rereading this interview, you said something about as an Appalachian writer how hard it is to explain what it's like to live here without being a stereotype.

And that's definitely something that I try to do. It's hard. And so, yeah, I'm really interested in you know how you feel yourself in your identity as like an Appalachian-Cherokee person and how you talk about that. And obviously, you've done a great job of that in your book.

AC: Yeah, Silas House and I have talked about this. We both agree that we didn't consider ourselves Appalachian until college. Didn't even think about it until I was in college. And really, you know, I guess I more so thought of myself as Cherokee, but never to the extent that I need to define myself as different because I was Cherokee. So, for me it always go back—and it's, by definition, it's about place and how that place influences my identity. And so by being both Cherokee and Appalachian, there is something in my identity that is, that fills a, fears protection of this land. That it is not destroyed for financial gain or anything like that. And I've written about the similarities between, that two communities can feel. So Eastern Band Cherokee and for example, Swain County, when families were removed from the Fontana area. You know, my grandfather's family was removed from Fontana for, by the TVA, for the dam project. And then of course the Road to Nowhere promise and all that—broken promises. There's so many similarities. And you see that throughout Appalachia. Sometimes it's with mining companies and things like that. So I think that any time you have communities who have laid down lives to protect land, then you know, that means we have a common identity in that way. You know, I think it's about, and maybe it goes back to survival and you know feeling a need to connect with a community, that you reliant on that community and you have an obligation to that community at the same time. I don't, there's never been a point in my life where I hadn't felt like I had some kind of obligation to my community. You know, when asked why I come home from Yale, I just can't imagine cutting ties, you know, like, "Okay, I've got my degree, forget all those people that helped me get to this point." And then I'm just gonna go off, I don't know where, I'll go to New York or something, I don' t know, and do my thing. I just, I cannot even fathom the idea of cutting myself off from the people who helped me get to where I am. But that's not to say that, it's not like this stagnant thing, right? And I've said this multiple times. For a culture, by definition, to exist, it has to grow and it has to change in some ways. But it has to do that based on its core values. So it's not, you know, it's not adapting to another culture necessarily. It's, but we can't stay the same or we die. And I think that's what the biggest thing I try to communicate to other people about Appalachia or about our native community, is that it is vibrant and changing and complex and it's not going to be stuck in one time period.

KA: I have to say this from like an "outsiders' perspective" but you know, I guess maybe since the Midwest is newer and its more transient and its more mixed, like, until I came here, I had no sense of what an identity like this would look like. I'm just so drawn to everybody and the way they speak about the land. Where I'm from, it's like, "Oh, the outside's pretty, love being outside, love doing things outside," but the land isn't home, the land isn't where we come from. And I think you put it really beautifully in your book, the spirit of the land, even that's something that I hear from a lot—

LK: I mean but it's so much more than, I mean the spirit is also there but I mean the, most of the book is about the literal bones of your ancestors that are in the ground. How do you think about that and how do you explain that jump from this spiritual connection to the land that many people feel to this like literal connection?

AC: Right. Yeah, I may answer this in a roundabout way, but I always think about when I was working in Chief Hicks's office. We had a politician from a neighboring community come through the office. And my office at the time was right next to, it shared a wall with his main office so I could hear conversations—I'm gonna code this a little bit—was around some development on some historically Cherokee land. And that development for that neighboring community would require potentially digging up Cherokee graves. And the politician did not quite understand the magnitude of that, right. It was, "Well, we'll put them somewhere else." And the way that Chief Hicks spelled it out for him, I will never forget. He said—and I'm paraphrasing—but he said, "I want you to imagine that I go to the graveyard and I dig up your grandmother. How do you feel about that?" Right? And until someone puts it in those terms, native ancestry, native bones are dehumanized for the rest of the world. They're in museums, right? They're artifacts, they're not human remains. And so that was something I wanted to comment on, was we are literally in this earth. And you would never dig up somebody's grandmother from a graveyard without a huge problem, right? So you know, I think about it a lot of times in that way. And again, it just goes back to that centuries of protecting this land and you know putting as much into this land, literally and figuratively, as—actually more than we seek to take from it. To me, that should be a human quality. It shouldn't be a native quality, it shouldn't be an Appalachian quality, but maybe just because of our experiences here, it seems that sometimes people don't understand that as much.

KA: So from an indigenous perspective, I mean, this is something I've seen throughout my work in archaeology, but how do you take people who see, who like to go arrowhead hunting—

AC: That was right in my head when you said that.

KA: People who love to go in plowed fields and pick up pottery, how do you take people like that who have a genuine interest in something but turn that conversation around so that they understand what those items and even the bones actually are and what they mean and the weight they carry?

AC: I think that's a really hard thing to do. I struggle with that all the time. You know, the worst experiences I have are when I meet someone new in whatever venue and we're having a great conversation and I'm like, "Oh, I like this person, this is a good human being." And then they say something you know that I'm just like, "Ugh, you have no idea." Right? And then, you know, I'm put in a position of, do I educate them? Am I going to offend them, which I probably will. You know, and it's just like this delicate weird situation to be in. and it is, one of our core values is sense of humor. So sometimes, you know, it is my go-to, but that doesn't, for some people, if you use sense of humor, they just don't get it. You're just gonna have to be blunt with them. But it's a real challenge, because, like you mentioned, those people don't have bad intentions, you know. And they want to connect in some way to something that is older than what they know. And there's lots of people who've talked about this topic, like people who want to claim native ancestry for example. I'm like, "Why?" What is—they don't want to claim other ancestry. It's sometimes not just a money issue for them, 'cause sometimes it is. But it's just this weird, a weird desire to connect to the stereotypes of native culture. You know, I think about someone searching for arrowheads for example. Is somebody gonna be searching for my sons' nerf gun bullets in a few hundred years? Like, I mean, it's, like that's strange to me that you're doing that, or pottery shards. I break bowls all the time at my house. Those are native pottery now, 'cause they belong to me. I can send them to you for, you know, for a fair price. It's just, it's strange when you look at the reality of what people are doing and how they want to connect. And I feel bad for 'em, but I just can't spend my time all the time teaching 'em. So I more and more walk away from it. I do teach some classes on like writing from native perspectives because I just got really tired of reading a lot of junk with stereotypes, but it's, I don't know. I don't have a good answer for that obviously, I've just kind of talked around it. But I just try to connect it to their own reality, right? So you know, "Why are you looking for arrowheads? What do you want to get out of that?" I don't care if people look for arrowheads. I mean, there are a lot of arrowheads out there, so but that doesn't make you native if you find one, and I think that sometimes people find that connection in weird ways.

I think—I'll speak for native culture—I think part of the issue for native culture is that in the larger United States narrative—this just came up with CNN—that native peoples are dead for most Americans. You know, we are a dead culture, a conquered culture. And so people, it's like this subconscious thought that we're dead, right. So that if someone were to meet a native person, they feel like they get a history lesson. It's like Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure. That's what it's all about. Oh my God, I'm excited about this.

LK: No, I see where you're going 'cause I think some of it is about, like this the extractive tourism aspect of being able to go and buy your fake arrowhead at a gift shop or—

AC: I have my tour guide for the day and I am now connected. And you know, it, when, but it always seems like those types of people want to go back to our past. They always want to talk about the past or trauma. That's the other thing, I mean, I met a lady when I was mountain biking. And we were on the Fire Mountain trails and we were at the top and we were just talking—once again, one of these examples of like, "Aw, she's pretty cool." I had a good conversation and then she finds out that I'm Cherokee. And she said something like, "Oh, how do they treat you?" I was like, "Who?" I don't know who you're talking about—how does who treat me? But you know, they wanted—or she wanted that painful narrative I guess. I don't know if she meant the government or my tribe or like, I don't know, who treats me, but I was like, "I gotta go." I don't know. It is an awkward situation sometimes to have conversations with people because they want you to stay in that time frame they're used to hearing about native people.

K: I do want to talk more about tourism and like I feel like that was such a part of the book, for me, about tourism. And you wove all these important Appalachian-Western North Carolina things in without explicitly being like, "This is about tourism now."

AC: Yeah.

KA: You picked such a great time period.

AC: Yeah, it really was a great time period.

KA: That was a really pivotal moment for change.

AC: Yeah, I've always been—so my family's background is really important in that. So my grandfather was Osley Saunooke and he opened Chief Saunooke's Trading Post in Cherokee. He was two-term chief, professional wrestler, he was an interesting dude. And actually my first manuscript was a fictionalized version of his life 'cause he's so interesting. But anyway, he opened up this trading post that kind of has now evolved to what's Saunooke Village in Cherokee. And so I have always—and then on my mom's side, my grandmother, her dad owned Myer's Court Motel in downtown Bryson City. She grew up, you know, I always just picture her sitting in the lobby of the motel in downtown Bryson City. She was a city girl, you know. So both sides of my parents' families were heavily invested in tourism (53:35). And that's all I knew growing up, was that our family ran those businesses. So that's always been interesting to me and then also you know, coupled with how you represent accurately and authentically, you know, we've had to make a living, so you sell what sells. Which are headdresses and things like that. But now we have an opportunity to change that narrative. One of my best friends in college is Lakota from Rosebud, South Dakota. And he used to always joke, "You owe me money because you are selling our culture." *laughs* and I was like, "Yeah, you're probably right." So you know, and then my master's thesis was actually on that topic of you know tourism in Cherokee. But it was for survival—and Appalachia is like this too—the products that were sold, the imagery that was sold—is still sold to a certain extent—for economic survival. You have to do that. Then how do you move away from that. And I've just been really proud of my dad who's 70 now and how he transitions away from that. Like he can be a pretty stubborn guy, but he at least cares enough and sees enough to be able to transition from that. And our tribal government in general does that as well. So it's how do you kind of sustain this economy that is built on the tourists wanting a certain thing, but also kind of transition it into an authentic representation.

LK: What do you feel like are some examples of that that have changed?

AC: So, you know, we used to have these powwow-style dancers and chiefing in downtown Cherokee a lot more. And they did little things, like rebuild the structures for them so you don't see those teepees anymore. And then bolster the Cherokee Friends program and the AniKituwah Warrior's program so that we're now sending out authentic representation of what our dances were like, what storytelling is like, how we actually dressed. So it's just providing that alternative image, because, you know, I mean there's still free enterprise if someone wants to go dance on the side of the road and take tips, they can do it. But we have to actively provide that other narrative so that people can at least have a choice of what they want to believe and invest in—literally invest in—for experiences. So you know, and the preservation foundation is always investing in those cultural programs and organizations. There are more classes offered in traditional arts, especially through the museum, and getting away from the cheap things.

KA: Driving through Cherokee, I have always noticed there's still a lot of like vintage signs, how do you feel about the preservation of some of that type of imagery? Do you think it's important to the story of Cherokee?

AC: Yeah, I mean, a part of our story is chiefing, right, are these teepees. I do think it's important as long as, like I said, we're providing that alternative narrative. The new buildings going in are not, you know, false imagery. I wish, I have always wished Cherokee would really think about what, collectively, what we want our—especially like downtown—image to be and we just can't get there. I cannot tell you how many planning meetings I've been in, how many plans I've seen and how many discussions—years and years and years—and we just cannot get there. And I don't know why. I don't know why. That didn't quite answer your question, but yeah, I love the vintage signs, but how do we portray them as vintage as opposed to our present existence? Like, we're still stuck, sorry. You know, I don't want that to be what we're sending to people but you know, you look at places like Bryson City and Sylva, that you can tell there is that history there and that appreciation for the vintage or the Art Deco in Asheville, for example. But there's more to it. It's continuing to change and grow.

KA: What do you think changed and enabled Cherokee to make this shift in their culture—or cultural presentation, sorry.

AC: I mean, I hate to say it, but money. I mean to have the economic resources that gaming has provided is the only way that we've been able to invest in our language programs, our cultural district. It really—money doesn't solve everything but it sure has helped in that avenue, you know. We can move from a survival model, right, to investing in those things that are of other value to us. So yeah, I think that's been hugely important. There's things that don't seem directly related, but are related. Things like taking over the school from the BIA or even the hospital so that we can approach healthcare from a more culturally authentic standpoint than we have in the past. And that only came about because we can financially do it.

KA: What do you think the rest of the country, or even the world, can learn from indigenous perspectives and experiences?

AC: I think they can learn a means of getting out of silos and appreciating that every part of a community, every person in a community has something to contribute to the whole and that sometimes outside of indigenous communities, we think that only certain people have the answers or only certain people can contribute to solutions. And what we've seen from indigenous knowledge and how it's been implemented even recently is that the community is stronger if everyone is involved, if everyone has a role to play in solutions to problems and also the direction forward for a community.

KA: What other writers have inspired you? And who should we read if want to learn more about indigenous perspective?

AC: Yeah, I mean, I often get this question about—I'll talk about other writers in a second—but specifically about indigenous writers. I always get the question, "What other Cherokee writers?" Well, sometimes I get Eastern Band, and I'm like, "Well, that's tough." So you know, there are other Eastern Band writers who have written essays and poetry and things like that to some extent, but you know, there are some other Cherokee writers in general that—Kelly Jo Ford just had a book come out about the same time as mine. And she's Cherokee Nation. *Crooked Hallelujah* is the name of her book. I really—Kelly Jo is great. If you like my book, I think that you would like—it's like Oklahoma. Obviously a different story but I don't know, I like her writing.

Let’s see. Was the Sequoyah professor at Western until he passed away. Conley. Robert Conley is another Cherokee author. Short stories, novels—he also did some non-fiction work. But I read—Louise Erdrich is like my hero in terms of indigenous lit.

But, you know, I have been really fortunate that I’ve had writers in my life for a long time. Our family was really good friends with Billy Letts, who is from Oklahoma but who has family here in this area. She’s not native, but she wrote *Where the Heart Is*. And so she was one of like those early—the earliest example of “Oh this is a famous writer that I know and I can have a conversation with her.” And she read some like early work of mine and ripped it to shreds in the nicest possible way and I just like sobbed. And I think that may be a moment where I was like, “I’m gonna be a writer.” ‘Cause like, I survived this, right, you know? And it was just like this challenge of, she was right, like I knew she was right. So she was one of the earliest people, but I’ve been fortunate enough to have mentors like Charles Frazier who I met when he was working on *Thirteen Moons* and was in Cherokee. He and his wife have been invaluable. And then the, you know, the network of writers in North Carolina and in Appalachia in general is just incredible because not only are they prolific, but they’re just good people.

KA: Did you have any say in your cover art? I love it.

AC: Oh, thank you. No, so I met—I don’t know all their titles—met this guy from the press. I was in Kentucky at Berea for an event and so I was able to meet with one of the editors—editor at Kentucky, kind of talk about the project and he asked if I had any thoughts, you know. “What do you think about the cover?” and I said, “I know enough to know that I cannot dream up a cover in my head.” Like I could not communicate that. I said, “But I’ll tell you what I don’t want. I do not want any stereotypical native imagery.” And we were on the same page from the beginning about that, that wasn’t a hard sell. And then I think I may have, I don’t know what he thought about me saying this, but I said, “I do not want mountains on the cover.” Because everybody has mountains on the cover. And you know, he was perfectly fine with that. I will say a funny story. So we were having this conversation at this café about the cover and before I get to the mountains thing, I’m talking about these stereotypical images, you know. I don’t want any headdresses or whatever on there. And I look on the floor—no lie—I look on the floor of the café and there’s a huge feather. And I collect feathers. I do consider them a sign in some way. But this is not an Indian thing, this is like, I just collect feathers. So I’m sitting there and I’m giving him my spiel about no stereotypical things and I’m just looking at the feather and I’m looking at him. And I was like, “Listen, there’s a feather on the ground. And I’m gonna pick it up. But I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about me picking this feather up.” So, luckily he has a sense of humor. I did pick up the feather. And then I told him I didn’t want mountains.

And so, had no idea what the cover was going to look like and I was so nervous. And so I get it in a PDF, you know, it’s the first time I see it, and I remember pulling it up—I don’t know, I had no idea what it was going to look like. And I just stared at it forever. You know, you would think that it would either be like, “Oh I hate it” or “Oh I love it.” I was just like, “Huh.” You know, I had no idea what I really thought about it. but then I read the explanation from the cover designer and it was like poetry. This guy like thought about every aspect, which I guess they do, that’s their job. I just didn’t know that they did that. So everything from the color being that kind of, both military but almost like CCC camp, you know? And then specifically because I said they couldn't put mountains on it, they played around with that a little bit. Those trees mimic mountain ranges, right? So that you are still connected that way. And I was like, that was tricky. And then the way that the words are going into the trees indicate the mystery that is in the book. And I just like the clean look of it. I've really come to love it for a lot of reasons.

LK: Well I wasn't going to ask anything else because I know about time, but you said the word "mystery" and so now I'm going to. I was really, I have trouble thinking about and describing to people kind of the mysterious mystic aspect of the mountains. And I was really interested in how you use the monkey to kind of do that for you in this book and I would just love for you to talk about it because I want to understand it more. It is one of those things that is kind of a stereotypical thing where people are like "Ooh, the mountains are so mysterious." But I'm like, it's not in a scary way. That's you putting that on this. And the monkey is so much more magical thinking than anything else.

KA: I'm so glad you brought that up.

AC: So you know one of the things, one of the reasons why our mountains are mysterious or magical is because of the biodiversity here, right. So it's scientific why we are magical. And so that's kind of what I was doing with the monkey as well. The monkey plays a lot of roles. Sometimes people don't appreciate how important Edgar is to me, but *laughs* so and you've probably heard me talk about this. One of the stereotypes that I wanted to push back against was of native people being "magic," right? So I take it up to a line a lot of times of, you know, there's the bear scenes and things like that. But again, it is just understanding your environment and what all this environment has to offer. Anybody who is rooted in place and protects place has a connection with place. So Edgar is playing—so the bears in the book speak to the fact that there used to be a bear clan and the bears are the most closely related to humans for the Cherokee. They stand on two legs, there's just a lot of similarities and then our stories talk about that as well. And so there's certain rituals associated with bear hunting, for example. But that's not that different from evolutionary science and humans acknowledging our close relationship to primates. And so I wanted the monkey, I didn't just make up a monkey. I mean, you know, Gary Cardin tells this story, we were on a Zoom together the other day and Gary was reminding me of the whole story 'cause I couldn't remember everything, but there was a monkey. Somebody had a monkey and they were in the woods. So I didn't just make it up completely but it made so much sense to bring attention to this animal that western culture has no problem acknowledging its nearness to humans but then all the sudden its magic that we acknowledge our nearness to bears in Cherokee culture? So I wanted to play those two things off. But also that is, you know, it's silly there's a monkey. That's part of like this area, that there are all these kind of weird quirky things. But there's stories behind why they're there, but it's part of what makes it magical, you know, that we have all of these—the stories too, right. The monkey doesn't still exist, but that story lingers and that makes these mountains magical, even if the monkey's no longer alive. And then of course you know Edgar was saved by Tsa Tsi who tells the story of the stockades and Cherokee people being captured and what it's like to be imprisoned, so there's that whole theme of imprisonment. And then finally, just the bone and who's bone is that. And you know, it's about the size of Edgar's. So there's that.

KA: I don’t think I can follow that up with anything.

LK: I’m gonna have to go get my copy back from my mom and re-read it.

KA: I have to read this all over again.

LK: I’m excited about that.