An Interview with Robert Kingett

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

disabled characters, transgressive literature, bad representation, marginalized voices, self-publishing challenges, small presses, traditional publishing, fiction vs non-fiction, romance genre, audio books, AI narration, machine learning, voice casting, community building, Creative Commons

**SPEAKERS**

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**Speaker 1** 00:01

Music. Welcome to this episode of Inside publishing, the series where we interview industry experts on everything publishing.

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Hi, I'm Tamara, one of the podcast officers for SYP South West. In this episode, I'm joined by author and activist Robert King as we discuss the obstacles facing disabled people in publishing his love for romance and the terrifying rise of AI. Hello, Robert. Thank you for joining us, society of young publishers inside publishing Podcast. I'm really happy to have you here. You're like such an inspiring person, so it'll be really cool to have a conversation about your experience in publishing and some of the work you've done. I guess my first question would be getting a little insight into how your lived experience as a disabled person has informed your writing, as well as maybe your relationship to publishing.

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That's That's very interesting so like so for those that don't know and for those that are listening to this via audio. I'm a white male and a cis gendered male, but I do intersect in other ways as well. I'm a gay, disabled author and writer, and that's really shaped my writing, essentially from an early age, I read extremely voraciously, but I was the kind of person that would be reading like Davin King at like, 10 years Old. So, so that's, yeah, don't ever do that. Yeah, like, so. So my reading tastes were, were like, were very, very different from a lot of people. I was very much into what I call transgressive literature and and when you're nine or 10, transgressive means something a heck of a lot of a lot different than now As an adult but, but I read things like lemony Nick It's a series of unfortunate events. I read VC Andrews Flowers in the Attic at a very young age. Again, nine or 10. Don't ever follow my example, but I was exposed to a lot of different kinds of literature, but there was always one thing missing, and that was a disabled characters. The only thing that I really saw was disabled memoirists writing about their their lived experiences, but I wanted something akin to a fictional story with disabled characters that didn't just cure their disability, because I thought it was quite strange that if anybody had a disabled character in their story at all. They were either cured or rendered non disabled because the author didn't know how to write a scene with a disabled character, so they just kind of threw their disability away for this sake of the plot. So the that was so from an early age, I told myself over and over and over again that I am actually going to write disabled characters and. And they're going to be flawed, and they're going to be human, they are going to be authentic, and some are going to be stereotypical. But I view, I view stereotypes as actually very necessary within publishing and like I will get to that later, but it's all about representation. For me, I want to see myself kind of on the page, and if I want to see myself, then I know that there's a whole swath of people that want to See representation also.

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Yeah, no, that is really important. I am curious about I know you mentioned that you talk about it a little bit more, but I read one of your blogs, which was about how we need more bad representation in books. And I think that's a really interesting message. And I would like if you could expand on what more effective representation looks like, as opposed to, you know, normative people placing standards on, what 'good' queer stories and characters look like. This is what this should look like for us to be able to digest this, digest it, even if it doesn't necessarily aid the people it's meant to be spotlighting. So I'm just interested in how you think representation can work effectively for marginalized voices.

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Yeah, so like, so it's tricky, because when I say the bad representation that that doesn't mean you should just write really nearly with no care in the world to do any kind of basic research as a marginalized person or Even a non marginalized person. I am of the belief that anybody should have the freedom to write whatever they want, even if it's outside their own lived experience, because that helps you to look out side of your own world, and look at other people and how they might perceive the world. I know that's a big no no today, but I but I think it's equally important that we give space to marginalized creators to create those stereotypes that you might find unconscionable, or or or Oh. Uh or horrifying, because the real world, whether you like it or not, is chock full of stereotypes and poor representation. So like so in the case of a disabled individual, so they might need a higher level of care, except that is seen as a stereotype for the mass population, but if you zero in on it. They haven't had their voices really told. So you need to give them the microphone, and you need to let them tell their stereotypical story, because by them telling their own story, even if it's stereotypical to you, that is going to break down so many walls of inclusion as For more bad representation and books I have always held the belief that one person's trash is an another person's Rev. Presentation. So I've read countless books where, where it was. It was lame bastard through all kinds of media and things like that, for not being authentic enough. But when you talk about what is authentic and what isn't authentic, then you're talking about gate keeping experiences, and then you're talking about erasing those marginalized people that maybe want to see more of themselves in a book, Even if it's not, even if it is stereotypical.

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I'm curious about sort of how you've been able to navigate getting published, because obviously, as important as it is to get these marginalized voices heard, obviously it's difficult with a lot of mainstream publishing because they don't think it's what people want to read necessarily, right? So like, how have you been able to overcome those obstacles with publishing?

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It's been very hard. Like, like, which is why, like, I, I don't publish a lot of books because, frankly, a lot of publishers are just not interested in taking them on. But I, but I also I just really, really hate self publishing, like there is nothing more that I loathe than the process of going through the picking a cover, trying to Find an editor that will edit it, trying to find a publicist that will make press happen on some level or something. I don't have a team. Essentially, when I do so publishing, it's basically all just one person hiring, hiring a team, and not me coming in to an existing team. And that road has always been incredibly agonizing and just and and just just, I'm just not a fan of it whatsoever now, now where I have found a success is utilizing small presses in dependent publishers. That seems to be the perfect middle ground to where you don't have to do everything, and yet at the same time, you don't have to wait for traditional publishing to realize that it's true. You're not going to make a lot of money, but your story is still it's still valuable to to just to a lot of people, so, but, I mean but, But despite the gate keeping that happens in traditional publishing like I still want to shoot for that eventually, because everybody talks about how traditional publishing is Slow and and things like that, but for a person like me that actually writes very slowly, I look at that and I'm like, it's perfect, because it fits right in to my slow pace of. Working and everything. So, so I'm just a backwards kind of person, I guess you could say, like, that's

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understandable. I'm curious too- do you have a favorite kind of medium to write? Because I know you kind of dabble in a lot of different ones. Like, obviously, you have your blog, and then you write articles and you write non fiction. Do you have a favorite?

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my, that's super hard. Why do you like? Like, I like doing fiction a lot more than non fiction, because fiction allows me to teach you while entertaining you at the same time, non fiction, to me, it feels more rigid. It feels more more kind of box in so fiction allows me to put concepts and things to different worlds that I can't explore with non fiction. Also, fiction really gives me a chance to tell my readers and my fans what my deepest hopes and dreams are, because non fiction so I can Write about what I want the world to be in a blog post or a memoir, for example, but I'm not showing, I'm telling. So in fiction, I can take those concepts and I can show you without bludgeoning you over the head at the same time. So yeah,

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wait that actually, yeah, that makes so much more sense. To be fair, that's actually kind of genius. Yeah, because I guess fiction can be a pretty powerful form of activism in that way. Yes, you can really visualize a better future.

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not only that, I mean, people need an Ex game. Yeah, so the the road is hard enough, so, so it so you need a break from, from reading about, well, yes, there are structural problems and things like that in the world, but, but you need, you can do both with fiction. You can you can educate and you can entertain. The best part about fiction is, like I said, is that you don't even know that you're learning until it just kind of hits you one day. So going back to the representation thing, so, so I've been engrossed in in in I know it's not called the the fourth wing series, but I wish Rebecca would have called it the fourth wing series, as opposed to The imprint series. Yes. So, so that's a very popular romance and fantasy book series, and that has a disabled character. And some are like, well, the protagonist is the living and body meant of of pushing through your disability at a. The cost of appearing on normal to society, but, but I don't view it like that. I view her as here's a disabled person that needs accommodations, and she just, she just has a very high pain tolerance like me so that. But I mean, at the same time, you should be able to read a character and know that this is a singular character, so it doesn't encompass all of the disabilities spectrum. So it's but there's also numerous amount a new, numerous examples of of how Rebecca, through her world building, shows that if you change the environment, You no longer have a disability. So that, to me, is incredibly powerful. And let's be real, I have a massive book crush on Zaid and Ryerson. So

**speaker 2** 21:45

crushing on book characters is much easier than crushing on real people,

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right? Yeah,

**speaker 2** 21:54

that is interesting, though, from a lot of what you've written, I gather that you're like, a big romance guy, and it seems like that was kind of a change. There was some somewhat of an evolution to that point. Yes, so I'm kind of curious what your relationship to romance is like. What does it do for you? You know what I mean?

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That's very, very interesting, because I used to really, really, really devalue romance, like I would be the first person to raise my hand and say romance is not real literature. It's not good literature, it's not real literature. I was that person, but that actually really speaks to the misogyny that plagues my country because I'm in America, yeah, and I'm pretty sure it there's ripples of it across the world, but here in the US, romance was seen as women's fiction, so

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men were not supposed to read it, because it doesn't have explosions. It doesn't have, like, very complicated characters, which, of course, is, is absolutely hogwash, but, but so so for, for, for years, I was very much like, you'll never get me to read a romance book like romance is Just trash. It's just 50 shades of gray, which which? So, for the folks that might not know, 50 cheese degrees is actually not oops, is actually not romance. It's technically classified as erotica, because the two have very, very distinct the dials in genre, so Radhika is not. Romance. Romance is not erotica, but I didn't know that way back then. So So, but then the pandemic happened. Then I, I was at home and I'm like, Well, let me just try some popular romance books. So then I tried a few. Then I graduated to authors like Kennedy Ryan, authors that are outside of my own lived experience. And reading these romance books, it really helped me to determine what's important in a read, relationship, communication,

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talking about things, working through problems, listening to your partner and really listening to what they need and what they have to say. More importantly, romance was starting to help me examine what I wanted out of a partner. More than that, it taught me how to how to listen to other people within friendships and more, but, but I think romance does more than that. So there are quite a bit of genres that view humans as the problem. So you've got like geek, you have a bunch of literature now that has taken a very cynical view on the world and like, well, humans are the problem, but romance is really the only genre that I know of that consistently says, Well, no, there really is hope for people to learn and grow and to become better people. So romance allows you, as the reader, to have empathy for the author, because you get to see their alert main receive one new message, deliberate. Do you best? Darkest desires for

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humanity, and you get to see how an author wants humanity to grow. So I think everybody should at least try a few romance books and things.

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So would you say you've applied everything you've learned in romance books in your real life? Or,

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yes, yeah, yes, I have my my relationships with where friends and otherwise have deepened considerably, because it's all about listening to people clearly communicating what you want. You're not going to change the world with these kind of interpersonal read relationships, but you're going to cause a a ripple effect of comradery around you that is going to be. Just wholesome, and you need that in your life. You need love in your life. So to have love in all of its shapes and forms, I just cannot thank the romance genre enough for showing me all the different ways that you can love a person

**speaker 2** 30:33

that's pretty beautiful to be fair. Yeah, you're right. I'm curious about your reading experience in general, because obviously, as someone who's totally blind, you're not reading it visually. So what format of audio do you use? I was reading you use graphic audio books, and then there's just audio books, right? I'm kind of curious what the differences are and what gives you a better experience reading wise, and if it's accommodated, really?

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Yeah, sure. So So for me, so I'm huge into publishers. So, so I pay very, very close attention to who the publishers are and and the the moves that publishers are making. So within the audiobook space, you have your traditional audio book publishers like like

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recorded books, 10 tour audio and things like that. Those typically have a single narrator. They might have a full cast, or they might do what is called a duet narration, which has the male reading any male parts of the book. Or you could have a female reading all the the female parts of parts of a book. So so if it's in her point of view, and his dialog comes up, the male narrator will just read that portion of the dialog, and then it will go back to to the female Narrator again, so that's duet, but then the graphic audio versions, it's it's kind of Like the old school audio dramas, but it has narration. So you have a sounds Gabe, you've got, you got sound effects to punctuate your imagination. There are some cases where I will prefer the graphic audio. Graphic audio is the audiobook hardware? Sure, so, so I will prefer the graphic audio version compared to the regular version, because I think in certain cases, I think graphic audio does a very job at casting. There are some audio book Nair writer choices that just honestly, lummix me to no end like like in traditional publishing, this actually happens quite a bit where, where you've got a character of color in the book, but then the audio book publisher will cast a white man to be reading. In that character of color, and it's just, it's, it's like, why would you ask like this? Just, why? Yeah, yeah, so. So when those kind of things come up, I usually find that, like I said, graphic audio does a reasonably better job. They're not perfect, of course, but they seem to get the tone of the audio, whereas I feel like a large number of audio book publishers, they just don't understand what tone the author is going for. And so that leads to a a hit or miss cast thing, if you will,

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is, is the author not? Are they involved in the casting process? Is it just the publisher?

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it's, it's, it's tricky, because some publishers will, will just do everything, but then some publishers will grant an author permission to to listen in on Sam bowls and things like that, and be more involved, involved in the process. So I but, I mean, but of course, if you're going the self publishing route, then you make all those decisions. But, yeah, that's not for me. I like to have a little bit of a little bit of column A and a little bit of column B. So like, let me be involved in this portion of the process, but you guys are the experts, so you guys handled that other portion of the process. So yeah, but for the most part, traditional publishing, the audiobook contracts, usually they stipulate that authors really aren't involved in the process, and that could actually work great for the author, because They might not want to be to listen to to, like hours long Greek sessions and things like that. So, so, but me, we pretty much established that I am an absolute weirdo. So so I like listening to to narangers perform in remote studios, because I get to fieratively lean in to the

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microphone and say, You're not channeling the voices I'm hearing in my head, so you need to, like, soften your tone a bit more here and here and here And here. There actually been quite a few people that have been like, Hey, you should go into audio book casting. It's like, it's like, well, I mean, that's great and stuff, but I I just don't have any audio editing ability, like, whatsoever. But I do have this uncanny knack for just picking an narrators that just work for like all genders i. Um, so like, let's take rope man says an example. So romance is de righted for for having, like, a female character try and make her voice lower and things like that. I have the uncanny ability to just pick out narrators for either gender that most men and most women, really, really, really like so, because I just have such a very, very fine tone ear that I know what works for, for what pace and things the novels are ad and things like that. So but, but sort of make a long story short, I'm available if any producers are listening. So yeah,

**speaker 2** 41:19

for sure, I'm also available. If anyone wants to hire me

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Well, you seem to be really passionately against AI- sorry, this is such a segue. Yeah, the version of AI that exists today, or what people call AI, which isn't AI, or, like, according to you isn't AI- I'mcurious as to how you potentially see the publishing world evolve with these technological advancements, and if its good or bad?

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Okay, so caveat to to my last statement, if you you're an audiobook publisher, and if you're thinking about hiring me, and if you're thinking about using AI for like, for a part of the process or something, I will actively sabotage your AI Project. That is how much I loathe what's called artificial intelligence. So I have a technology kind of back ground as well, and and what other people think is artificial intelligence isn't really artificial intelligence, it's it's just a form of machine learning that is applied to a specific task, and you're not Saving money because you're tweaking the software, so you have to spend just as much time editing this, this binary code that that it's like, what's really the point when, when you can actually hire a human being and maybe give opportunity to someone that is going to be around longer than servers are going to be around. So like, like websites, they come and go. We've seen this happen over and over and over and over again. And the same thing with these AI servers. So someone somewhere is hosting your precious AI server, and when that goes away, you can't generate audio books, you can't generate this or generate that. So you're back to square one. I don't think that there is any good. Good whatsoever in AI narration, even if we're talking about disabilities, right? I just the small benefits that you get from cloning your voice because you because there have been people that have had strokes that have cloned their voice and used it to to record AI audio books and things like that. And even for that, I would say, I would say that is a very small victory that is not going to last long because some one is going to take that voice clone and not pay you to use it, So you get a whole bunch of exploitation happening. And tech loves to exploit marginalized people, so you're just giving them more ammunition to exploit you in the future, even though it has a small benefit. Now I just, by the way, I just refuse to you to listen to an AI generated book, even if you're a small creator, I just refuse to use your generated audio book or listen to your generated audio book, because that tells me that you didn't really think outside of the box, that you just wanted to have a product out there, so that's totally fine, but you could do things like you could make your work a Creative Commons license, and then you could take it to amateur voice artists, and you could say, like, Hey, do you want to practice on my book here? Here's my book, and it's under a Creative Commons license. So if you want to practice, you can practice. Just give me that the audio files so that I can publish them on a podcast or something. So neither one of us is probably going to make a lot of money, but you get community, you get networking, But if you really, really wanted to help amateur, voice server artists, and if you use their work or something, and if they publish it under a Creative Commons license, for example, why don't you reach out to them and say, like, Hey, what's your your pay pal? Link, because I have a ton of listeners. So a lot of people that listen to your work, they have an opportunity to give to you. So that's a very hippie way of saying to build community rather than products. So yeah, but I realized that publishing is a business, so, so that's, that's, that's a very, very hard line to work. Walk, because I've even had the the question numerous times. It's like, it's like, why don't you have more argue books of your work? And it's like, well, because I can't pay the blind and visually impaired voice talent that I hire. Yeah, so, but I mean, at the same time, I just refuse to use AI because I actually take pride in my work, so That's that plus plus like you deserve a better experience. As a listener. So

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yeah, I agree it's a big no to AI, terrible creation.

**Speaker 2** 51:20

amazing. Thank you so much for talking with me. This was yeah, this was really fun. And yeah, I'm hoping all our listeners enjoyed this. You're a really inspiring person to talk to. I hope you had fun.

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very much.

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All right, thank you so much for joining us. Thanks again to Robert Kingett for joining us at inside publishing. If you want to check out more of Robert's work, make sure to look at his most recent release, pass the salt, as well as his online blog. Robert Kingett.com

**speaker 2** 51:59

Thank you for listening to Inside publishing, I've been your host, Tamara. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple podcast, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts, it really helps us reach more people. Also feel free to let us know your thoughts on social media or send suggestions our way at podcast.syp@gmail.com. See you next time.