Jessica Alice:

So please join me in welcoming Gayle Kennedy to hear about earning a living from your writing and never writing for free.

Jessica Alice:

So, Gayle Kennedy is a member of the Wongaiibon clan of South West New South Wales. She was the Indigenous Issues editor and writer for Streetwize Comics from 1995 to 1998. In 2005, her book of poetry Koori Girl Goes Shopping was shortlisted for the David Unaipon Award. And Gayle went on to win the award in 2006 with her book Me, Antman & Fleabag. That book was shortlisted for a Victorian Premier's Literary Award and a Deadly Award, and was also commended in the Kate Challis RAKA Award.

Jessica Alice:

Her children's books for the Young Strong stories were nominated for 2011 Deadly Award for Achievement in Literature. She's had articles and short stories published in publications as diverse as The Australian, Women's Weekly, Reader's Digest, Australian Author, Phoenix Education Review, Australian Writer, The Sydney Morning Herald, and The Edinburgh Review.

Jessica Alice:

Good heavens, Gayle.

Jessica Alice:

And she's also presented at various writers' festivals and NAIDOC events as well as speaking both nationally and internationally on her experience with polio and disability in general. And she won the Red Room Company Award on a poem to celebrate the Carved Trees Exhibition at New South Wales State Library.

Jessica Alice:

And I should also say that Gayle speaks to schools and she runs writing workshops. She has published six new graphic novels with OUP in February 2014. And she's gone on to have work published in Penguin Anthologies, Currency Press Anthology, Ora Nui Anthology and Suddenly Magazine.

Jessica Alice:

Please welcome Gayle Kennedy.

Gayle Kennedy:

Hello, everybody. [foreign language 00:01:47], which is a hello greeting, in the Ngiyaampaa language, which is my language. I'm an elder of the Wongaiibon clan of the Ngiyaampaa-speaking Nation of New South Wales. And I've been a professional writer since, I guess 2007, because I found myself in a wheelchair and suffering from post-polio syndrome, which put the skids on a fairly good career in the public service. And I had to actually say to myself, "Well, how am I going to make a living now? I can't get up in the morning." And I very foolishly thought that I would become a writer.

Gayle Kennedy:

But, funnily enough, it's worked out for me, because I've been very willing to be adaptable. And frankly, for quite a few years I never actually told anybody that I was in a wheelchair, and that I had a disability whenever I sent things off to publishers. But then when my book Me, Antman & Fleabag came out, then I had to actually go and accept the award, and then it became obvious that I was in a wheelchair. But I try very much to not let that interfere with my ability to make a living as a writer. And I've been very well published. I've published 11 books through Oxford University Press, I've published with the University of Queensland, I've published through Currency Press, Penguin, The Edinburgh Review, The Village Voice, various newspapers and magazines. And I will write pamphlets [inaudible 00:04:02].

Gayle Kennedy:

I review children's books to make sure that there's nothing that's culturally inappropriate in them. And I'm now writing [inaudible 00:04:18] into a television series, so I'm now learning how to screen-write and I find it brilliant, because I have a background in writing graphic novels. And so telling a story with word and dialogue is an amazing experience and a learning experience. I never say to anyone who asked me, who wants to commission me, I never say that I can't do it. When they call me and they say, "Can you do this, Gayle?" I go, "Yes, I can." Then I pull over to the side, have a mad panic attack and then get back to learning how to do it. And it has worked for me. But the frustration that you go through as a person with a disability, in terms of getting invited to writers' festivals.

Gayle Kennedy:

Despite a great portfolio of work behind me, I'm never asked to sit on Panels, just as people like Gaele Sobott's been invited to sit on Panels, and the Sydney Writer's Festival, the Melbourne Writer's Festival and the Brisbane Writer's Festival. And I've been, they see me as difficult, because I get angry when they don't listen to me and what my needs are, when I can't access the stage, when they refuse to come up with a measly airfare for a carer to travel with me. It's just so frustrating, because then you find that you have to say no and then you get a reputation for not being able to turn up when it's actually not your fault, because you can't travel alone, you need somebody to be there with you.

Gayle Kennedy:

That was the wonderful thing about this particular conference, that that was all covered and it's just unfortunate that I'd gotten real sick, and I'm still not really well, but I'm really glad that I can be here today and have a chat with you. I wanted to talk a bit about how writers with disabilities are being left out of residences, for instance. I see people strolling around the grounds of Florence and Rome and Paris and you can go up and go in their residences, but there's nothing there for people in wheelchairs, there's absolutely nothing. The Arena for years has been accessible, but this year was finally given a grant to build a ski-dome in the grounds and a path, an accessible path into the main building so that people like me can actually go and apply for residences there.

Gayle Kennedy:

But I wonder, a lot of the residences are in old buildings, but why on earth can't they find the money to build a studio for us in the grounds of these great residences in Rome and Florence and Paris, it's frustrating, it's annoying. And I really don't like the politics of envy. And what I should really have said there are envious people taking up those residences, why can't we freely apply for those residences, knowing full well that when we get there our needs will be met. And we get left out, writers get left out a lot in terms of multidisciplinary branch funding which is where we often find ourselves as writers with disabilities. We're up against people who are applying for things like art and theatre, and how literature is being seen in the arts in terms of funding and funding Boards, is that it doesn't jump out at you, an application doesn't jump out at you, it's not rewarding, to see those beautiful paintings, fabulous plays and musicals, a very tactile Bolivian Soldier, the translucence of a piece of Silverman pottery, in-your-face performance art.

Gayle Kennedy:

A book is seen as a throwaway, something for the bargain bin, it's not immediately apparent, you have to open it and smell it, appreciate the sight of a freshly cracked spine of a book and then surrender completely to the world that has been created by who write There needs to be an understanding that books are a work of art and are created by artists. And writing has been for me a saviour and I want to be able to be funded properly to continue the work that I do. There should be more than just a Literature Board for us to apply to. When we apply to multidisciplinary Boards, then we should be given much more of a go when it comes to actually getting funding. And I think funding can be [inaudible 00:10:18] any type of person who really needs to have a career with them, just somebody to travel with them and somebody to take care of the heavy lifting, so that you're not stressed and overwhelmed by everything. [inaudible 00:10:36] in terms of funding.

Gayle Kennedy:

And I just saw a woman who'd won a major award in America, the Tony Award. And while she was able to receive her individual award, because she was already at that stage, when it came time to actually be on stage with the rest of the cast when they were given the award for the best musical, she actually had to sit in the audience while the rest of the cast were up on stage making their speeches and accepting their awards. And there were two things that really concerned me about that, I mean, I'm going back, I'm old, you have to excuse me, the old saying that they can put a man on the moon, why could they not have something there, built a ramp, there are all kinds of ways and means of getting her on stage with the rest of the cast. So that of course was frustrating and annoying.

Gayle Kennedy:

But the other thing was, where was the solidarity of the cast with their fellow cast member, why didn't they refuse to go on stage without her, why didn't they stand down at the bottom of the stage and demand that microphones be handed down to them. I was extremely disappointed that there was no solidarity. And people are constantly being misled about access, they go, "These are all old buildings, blah-blah-blah." That's not good enough. I've been to the Louvre in Paris, I've travelled, I know how things can be made accessible, and these are old buildings that are hundreds of years older than the theatre is in New York and houses in the Blue Mountains. And also there was a young guy called Dylan, who apparently won the Logie, and the only reason I even thought about the Logie is that he actually said, Dylan Spodek, because he said he sat in the audience and he didn't see a ramp, so he just automatically assumed that he hadn't won. So, he was actually denied all that, the beautiful anticipation about winning the award.

Gayle Kennedy:

It turns out apparently there was a ramp, but it was at the back. But why wasn't there one at the front so he could with the rest of the people enjoy that thrill of anticipation. These are the things that, and I've been in the same situation, when I've been up for awards and there's no ramp, automatically you're bereft already, because there's no way you could possibly have won. I just think that we're overlooked and we're forgotten. They have people there opining about the measure of society is how we treat our most marginalised. And I'm thinking, well yes, rather than make yourself feel good about saying stuff like that, why don't you actually get out there and do something. When you see something that's inaccessible or if you go to a theatre that's inaccessible, why don't you mention it, why don't you write to the theatre and ask why not. It's all very well to make yourself feel good thoughts, but that doesn't get us into the theatres, that doesn't get us on the main stages and Panels of writers' festivals. We're being overlooked.

Gayle Kennedy:

I guess I'm seen as a bit bolshy when it comes to this, because I'm loud, I get loud, I get angry, and I think they probably think it's much too difficult to deal with me. But I'm not being difficult, I'm just asking for a fair go, and for all my fellow artists with disabilities. I mean, I am an Aboriginal woman, but I don't experience anywhere the kind of discrimination as an indigenous person that I do as a person with a disability. And access equity, these are the things that we want, we don't want be picky and don't want to be seen as special for simply getting out of bed in the morning. We want to be, we don't want to be on television, accompanied us with swelling music, humble and solemn prose that shows us as noble heroes for simply going about our day-to-day lives. We're not actually here to make people feel good, we're here to make them weep and drop coins in buckets, we are not the other, we are just like everyone else. We are normal people whose bodies have been knocked down, whose bodies are frail, they're easily damaged.

Gayle Kennedy:

Anyone can have that house on TV being in a wheelchair or using a walking stick, anyone can live in that house with everything functioning. We're all busy functioning and we [inaudible 00:16:52], none of us know the future. And also we need to stop looking at people as wheelchair bound, we're not. Wheelchairs are our legs, our way of moving around in the world, we're not bound to them, they are freedom for us. Before I had my wheelchair, my life was a total mess, because I was trying to live in an able-bodied world and trying to walk and knocking myself out with the effort. I became ill, I became depressed and for the first time in my life considered suicide. And this is not the way that we should be living. I came across a man, who's just recently died, Professor Peach, and he actually said something that resonated with me, he said, "We shouldn't be looking at better ways for people to die, we should be looking for better ways for people to live."

Gayle Kennedy:

And this is definitely not happening. And our art is one of the ways that many of us can make a living, that we can explain to other people. And seen as not as some kind of therapy, we need to be paid for our art. I made the decision quite a few years ago, it didn't matter whether it was $50 or a voucher, it was very, very important for me that we received, that people with disabilities are respected as professionals, are respected as artists and are well paid for that work. I've said many times, people say, "Well, let's get you exposure." I will say to them, "I don't need exposure, I need a living salary." And this is how I've made my living, this is how many of us make our living. And we need to be seen as working artists, working artists with something to offer people. Something beautiful, something different. And what you could gain from us is [inaudible 00:19:26].

Gayle Kennedy:

What we have to give, we are a whole bunch of us out there with disability [inaudible 00:19:44], if we're not constantly left out of the narrative. And I sincerely hope that we have more things like this. And I sincerely hope that if there are able-bodied people out there who have any influence over writers festivals and of arts festivals, then advocate to have us on there, advocate some money to be put aside so that people with disabilities can bring carers with them. And I see things like the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, how about the idea of treating people with disabilities as humans, treating us better, how about making society accessible to us and easy for us, don't speak about us, speak to us, don't speak to carers. And listen, wait for our answers, we might take long for instance with our answers, but wait for it, listen to them and respond. And it can only benefit society [inaudible 00:21:26]. But us, as people and as artists.

Jessica Alice:

Thank you so much, Gayle, for joining us. That was wonderful to hear you speak. I think the thing that came through the most about everything that Gayle was saying was about advocacy. So much about what you spoke about was advocating for literature, the importance of literature as an art form, about advocating for access and inclusion in things like festival main stages and the importance of solidarity of non-disabled artists with disabled artists. I love Gayle's attitude that if anyone asks her to do anything in any art form, she doesn't say that she can't do it, she takes up the challenge and will learn how to be a fabulous screen writer and will write graphic novels.

Jessica Alice:

Which, I suppose, is something that was reflected in what Kate was saying about not being humble and trusting in your abilities. Yeah. So join me in thanking Gayle, who [inaudible 00:23:09]. She's fabulous.