**Down to the Struts**

Season 4 Ep 5: Artificial Divide

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Robert Kingett

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today we'll listen in on my conversation with Robert Kingett. Robert is a totally blind, gay, essayist, author and freelance journalist, Robert and I talked about his journey to becoming a writer, why we need more queer disabled voices represented in fiction, and how he created the anthology, Artificial Divide, which showcases the short stories of blind writers. Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much, Robert, for joining me today. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

Robert Kingett:

Sure I'm I'm very happy to be here. So yeah,

Qudsiya Naqui:

great. Well, why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and what got you interested in in writing fiction?

Robert Kingett:

Sure. So I'm a, a totally blind Caucasian male, I am very thin, so I look malnourished. But I can assure you I'm not. I am a gay. Male. And I'm an author and a journalist. And I'm merely a personal essayist. But I have done quite a bit of journalism, in terms of like, in the in the way of reporting and other types of journalism. So what got me into fiction work, is fiction is a lot, it, it's a more expansive playground, that'll let me play around with concepts and things like that. And I don't have to stick to the truth, or what really happened, or this and that, and this and that. And, also, I've learned that fiction is a great way to explore social issues, and how to educate the reader about various social issues without having the veneer of a lecture.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's so true. It's, it's a way to play with the truth, I guess, in a certain sense. So yes, what, you know, what, how did what you read as a as a, as a young person in terms of your your consumption of fiction? How did that influence, you know, how you approach your own work?

Robert Kingett:

Yeah, sure. So, um, so I read a lot of different things as a kid and, and some of those were not for children. But I was a very, very, very precocious young person. So, I would read things way above my, my grade level, and also, I just read a lot of different kinds of work that in bodied, different writing styles , so that I could take away the parts I really liked about it and the parts I did not like about it. So for example, when I was like 11 or 12 I read Flowers in the Attic, which is definitely not for 11/12 year olds. It's, it's by V. C. Andrews, and she's long dead now. But she, she has a ghost writer. And, um, but I was looking, I guess there was a deeper part of me that was looking for disabled people and hoping that I would actually be influenced by disabled writers. And since I wasn't really finding a lot of that, hardly any of that, as a child, I just took from whatever I liked from the mainstream Well, while hoping that that, you know, eventually I would see more disability, representation in literature, in particular, blindness and visual impairment. So, so, different books had different influences in my life. But I also wanted something more

Qudsiya Naqui:

I definitely looking back on books that I've read as, as a child and I consumed I also was always reading above my grade level or level and loved love to read fiction as a young person. And, you know, I didn't even think about it truly, I wasn't sort of in a place of consciousness about my disability even but, but it's true, you know, you saw very few representations of, of blind people in literature. And if they were they, they sort of played into, you know, tropes that we all are very familiar with either. Yeah, person who should be inspirational to others, a person who has a tragedy because of their blindness, just the common kind of tropes that disabled characters often find themselves fitting into.

Robert Kingett:

I was very much like you, I wasn't very consciously aware of my disabilities, i To be clear, like, I wasn't hunting for it, like on a daily basis in in looter for. But I would get super, super excited, even if those poorly represented tropes came on the page. So that's where I was at. Now, my standards have grown and I don't want to read those kinds of harmful tropes anymore.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, exactly. Once you come into that consciousness, it's hard to hard to unsee it, if you will. You recently, were working on a project which I am so honored and privileged that you shared with me, which is called Artificial Divide, which is a an anthology that you've edited. Can you can you tell us a little bit about how artificial divide came to be?

Robert Kingett:

Yeah, sure. Sure. It came from actually a watching a Twitter pitching contest. So So traditional publishing, really likes to have pitching contests, probably to make themselves feel more of our data or something, I guess, now that there's all turned out to gate keeping and the status quo. So I was reading through those, I love to read the people who post on these things, because I find so many great books to keep track of and to watch out for Except I was not seeing anything by blind or visually visually impaired authors, and this happened for about three years in a row, and I'm like, Okay, well, something is just not right. Like, I should be able to find very easily a blind or visually impaired a fiction writer. So there's tons of memoirs, and tons of non fiction and not knocking. And any of those stories, those stories are very important. We need more of those kinds of stories. But at the same time, like, I get kind of burnt out at reading about someone dealing with a realist society, and it's someone in real life, you know what I mean? So I wanted to see a fictional story where the characters just happened to be blind or visually impaired. And they, they were dealing with a fantasy world or, or with a science fiction twist on the screen reader, for example, or just just anything that wasn't non fiction. And I was not finding anything. So I just woke up one morning, and I'm like, okay, nothing is out there. So I'm going to create this product that does not exist, or may not exist in large quantities.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's so awesome. So how did you find all of the authors that are represented in the anthology,

Robert Kingett:

I put out a call out for submissions, and then I spammed every blind and visually impaired person that I knew and said, Please, for the love of Guide Dogs everywhere. Share this with your net, work, share this, share this. And, and luckily, a lot of people were like, Hey, this looks cool. I will want to share it now. Like yay, maybe I'll get some submissions. That was not not the case. I received tons of sub missions from blind or visually impaired people in Nigeria, in Australia, in Canada, and, of course, and in the US, and there’s just a lot of writers all over the world, Japan also. And, and that was, that was hugely liberating to me. And I'm like, Yes, I know, that I'm actually doing something right. So so that's, so I was very happy that my network put up with my spamming and shared it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

that's wonderful. And I you know, I'm working my way through the, the audio version of the book, and I love how it does exactly what you described so many different stories, so many different characters, some, you know, deeply lovable, some more complicated to wrap your head around and you don't erase their blindness. Their blindness is very visible and seen in these stories, but it isn't the central sort of focus of the plot

Robert Kingett:

Exactly

Qudsiya Naqui:

and I love that about it and it's it I love, you know, science fiction and fantasy. And I feel like it really speaks to that. Many of them speak to that sort of genre. And they just sort of transport you on the terms of the blind person who's writing who's the who's the author, which I find so lovely.

Robert Kingett:

Exactly. And thank you for acknowledging that they thought you was a success, or is a success, I should say. It's a, it's validating to me, and it should be validating to all of you that there is a market out here, even if you can break through to the main drain or to those gatekeepers. There's someone out there that is hungry for your kind of storytelling. And so just trying not to give up. There's an audience for for your creation, you just have to find it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah. So what do you hope that people who read artificial divide will will take away from it,

Robert Kingett:

that blindness is it's not a one size fits all thing. And I also want people to take away that it is possible to have fiction stories with blind or visually impaired characters in them and have them be exceptional stories, have them be great stories and whimsical stories and tragic stories, and I want people to realize that there's an untapped pool of talent out here. And if you don't capitalize on that talent, then some one else will win? Well, so gatekeeping is, is not as productive as you think it is.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's great. What do you hope to see change in the publishing industry, as you've worked, you know, as a, as a writer of fiction yourself as a journalist, what do you think needs to change in order to to get more of these voices heard and get these voices to their audiences?

Robert Kingett:

Yes, it's a common practice in the publishing industry. But it's not widely known. So publishers, and we're talking about publishers with a lot of money and a lot of Reese sources, they are the ones that actually control the market, you know, like, like, for example, there was a brief time when vampires were not cool. And, and there was a time when vampires were cool. And that was because of publishing putting out all these different variations of vampire books. And there's a common thing that happens in the industry, and it, it's, it really creams, my corn, so to speak. Publishers have this misconception that because disability is so niche that we should not flood the market with just say well material that the general public can only handle one kind of disabled author at a time, whether that's per publishing cycle or per year or per decade or something like that, and that needs to completely go away. Publishing really really needs to really needs to get over themselves and publish more disabled voices in one year or one publishing cycle or one decade?

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, I think that's there's sort of a tokenism that happens right? In the publishing industry where it's, it's, you know, we have our one disabled author, and we've done our job, when in reality, we're talking about disabled people make up a quarter of the US population, for example, if we're looking at this country, that's a pretty big market, if I say so.

Robert Kingett:

It again, like it truly is. And publishing hasn't grasped this concept yet, that there's an audience that you're not tapping into. It just baffles me why you would restrict your your audience, because you think that they general public won't carry, you know about having a wide range of disabled authors, it just baffles me to no end.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah, I agree. And not even just having more than one disabled author, but the idea that we can have more than one book that centers on your experiences and the body and the and the worldview of a disabled character.

Robert Kingett:

Exactly, you hit the nail on the head.

Robert Kingett:

So Robert, the important question here, where can people find your work? And where can they find Artificial Divide?

Robert Kingett:

Sure, yes. So Artificial Divide is it in in a lot of places. So the easiest way to locate it is to go to my website, which is blindjournalist.wordpress.com. And if you go there, you'll see a landing page. And that'll have live links where you can purchase the ebook or the audiobook or the print book, which is in large print, by default.

Qudsiya Naqui:

that's fantastic. Well, I hope our listeners check out Artificial Divide, I can tell you it's it's a wonderful collection of stories by blind and low vision authors. And I hope everyone grabs a copy and visits Roberts website to check out more of his work as well. Well, thank you so much, Robert, for joining me, this has been such a delightful and illuminating conversation.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you for having me.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer, Ilana Nevins and our social media manager, Avery Anapol. If you'd like to become a patron and support the awesome team that brings this podcast to life, visit patreon.com/downtothestruts. You can also join our Facebook group Down to the Struts Podcast to become part of our growing community. You can also find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And finally, don't forget to subscribe rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen, or you can do none of that and simply enjoy the conversations that you find here. Stay tuned for the sixth and final episode of season four coming to you on February 15. I am beyond excited to share my conversation with the fabulous Cheryl green and Thomas Reid. As veteran disabled creatives, Cheryl and Thomas were among my most important advisors as I created Down to the Struts. I have learned so much from them over the past year. And I'm delighted to share their infinite wisdom with you plus a very exciting announcement about their new collaboration. You'll have to stay tuned to learn more! Find me back in your feeds in two weeks so we can get back down to it.