



## INTERVIEW WITH KRISTEN ARNETT

By Madison Shanley

2/15/2021

Kristen Arnett's debut novel, *Mostly Dead Things*, invites readers to step deep inside Central Florida through the eyes and mind of Jessa-Lynn Morton.

Left to pick up the pieces after her father's suicide,

Jessa throws herself into the family taxidermy

business like never before. As the Morton's come to

know love and loss in a deeply intimate way, they

have no choice but to try and understand who they are all really are. Released in 2019, it quickly became a New York Times Bestseller and garnered acclaim from critics and fans alike.

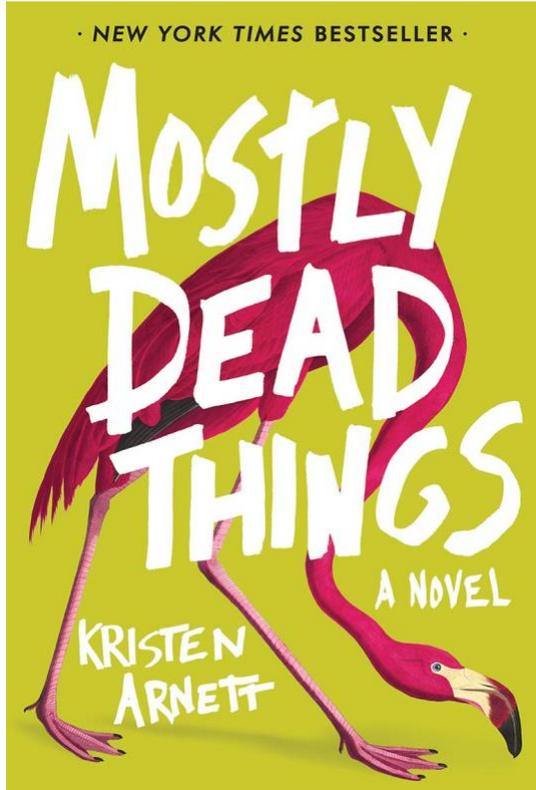
A lifelong writer, Arnett was quick to find inspiration for her next novel, *With Teeth*, which is set to be released in June '21. This time, the plot follows two mothers and their complex relationship with their difficult son. Domesticity and intimacy are central themes as these Floridians attempt to navigate their way through their deeply complicated life. It's a story that begs the reader to ask if there is any point of view they can trust.

Not only a novelist, her essays have been published by the likes of *Literary Hub*, *The Rumpus*, *The Guardian*, *Buzzfeed* and *The New York Times*. The self-proclaimed "lesbian Willie Nelson," Arnett has an unbelievable ability to capture the lives of people who often get overlooked.

I spoke with Arnett about her novels, queer experiences and how she's come to be the writer she is today.

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**Interviewer:** So, I wanted to start things off by talking about your debut novel *Mostly Dead*



*Things*. You have two quotes as the sort of introduction to your novel, one being the t-shirt proverb that claims, “Happiness is a large gut pile” – which I found really funny – and then the other is a Thomas Harris quote, “Problem-solving is hunting; it is savage pleasure and we are drawn to it.” What was the significance of these quotes for you?

**Arnett:** When I was thinking about what I wanted to put at the front of the book – because I am a huge fan of quotes opening novels, I always like to see what

other authors choose for that. I’m a big Stephen King fan, actually, and he always has at least one. Usually, he chooses like three or four [laughs]. I think he has a hard time pairing them down. So, for me, I wanted whatever was going to be at the front of the book to really represent how the book felt to me. And the book to me, felt like a mixture of kind of dark and also absurd and kind of funny, a kind of dark comedy. So, the gut pile thing was very much something that made me laugh when I was doing all my research. The other one was one that I was thinking a lot about how I wanted to frame the narrative ahead of time and so much of taxidermy has to do with hunting, even though there’s technically not any hunting in the book. At least not anything

that pops up in present tense in the text. But I wanted it to have relevance when it came to how we process animals, right, like the death and then processing? And then have that go hand in hand with the leftovers, the remnants, which is the gut pile left after. Those two just seemed to fit nicely together, and they made me laugh on the page. Honestly, at the end of the day, that's what I'm looking for; if I can put different ideas or content together and they can make me laugh or think something unexpected. I wanted to be a good contrast between the two of them, and those two really seemed to fit.

**Interviewer:** Now, did you seek those quotes out? Like, you have a collection of quotes that have resonated with you over the years or did they reveal themselves to you while you were working on the novel?

**Arnett:** I didn't seek out specifically to find them. I read a lot of horror and different things, so I kind of halfway remembered that quote and I was trying to think of it; I ended up having to look it up and find it. The t-shirt quote I found on accident. I was on a lot of forums and chat rooms with people who do taxidermy and it was a shirt that people were selling, so, it was just very funny to me and I felt like I had to put that in there. Those things just kind of happened.

**Interviewer:** When you're writing a character, do they take time revealing themselves to you or do you feel that you need to understand them before you give them life on the page?

**Arnett:** Oh, yeah, I definitely don't know anything while or before I'm writing. I'm not a person that outlines. I think that's a good way put it - I think characters, quite often while we're

working, reveal themselves as I'm writing. Even if people do outline, I think characters shift and mold. Which relates to the process of making creative work. Making something that's supposed to be alive, like a character, we obviously learn things about them as we write them. For me, I want to write characters, plots and scenes that feel surprising, even to me, as I'm working on them. I want to be continuously surprised or else I feel bored. Especially for *MDT*, I had very few things settled for myself. I knew what the character's names were, I knew what they did for a living and I knew that Jessa was queer. Other than that, I wanted to figure out who they were as I went along writing. Like how they sat inside a place and how they sat inside of their routines, that's how I discovered who they were.

**Interviewer:** I think that is something that translates really well throughout the novel. In the beginning, I was sort of expecting Jessa to be this kind of deranged individual, and while I think she is to some degree it is not nearly as severe as I thought it would be. She was far more complicated than I gave her credit for in the beginning.

**Arnett:** I think that's just like human beings are pretty complex. I enjoy, when I'm working... I don't know if I necessarily want to say, 'I super enjoy writing', I love to do it but it can be frustrating and stressful. But that's one thing that's very interesting to me, working on a novel or a story and kind of discovering what kind of humanity characters contain. You know? People just contain multitudes, so characters do too.

**Interviewer:** Definitely. You even have really complex ideas throughout the novel, specifically this notion of remembering and nostalgia. Jessa seems to have the kind of experiences that one

would want to forget, and I think the way you framed the narrative – with time jumps, having chapters flip between past and present – really helps to highlight those complexities. I'm curious to know what your thoughts were on how the past can ultimately stay in the present.

**Arnett:** Well, in writing the novel I wanted to write about the inescapability of it. As human beings, we don't get to choose when we remember something. Wouldn't that be nice? If we just chose not to remember the things that were painful. We don't have *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* or anything. There are certain things that trigger memory within us and regardless of whether or not they're painful or they're good, they contain a lot of stuff.

Obviously, I'm the author, so, I'm writing from a personal perspective but it seems deeply human to have a scent trigger a memory or a song or a commercial coming on tv that reminds you of something. Especially if you've lived in a town your whole life. I grew up in Florida and I've lived in Florida my whole life, I've lived in Orlando for most of it, so there's a ton of stuff there for me that I have memories attached to. It seemed like writing a character who has only lived in one place and has all this love, loss, grief, anger, pain and happiness; also, her family, and all of this is attached to her hometown – how could she escape these memories? I wanted to find a way to set this inside the narrative so that it feels very human. Having every other chapter be a memory felt like the way to show that the past is continuously happening. The past kind of syncs up with the present.

**Interviewer:** I read an interview with you where you talked about Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* – which is a graphic memoir – and how it inspired you to explore family dynamics within your

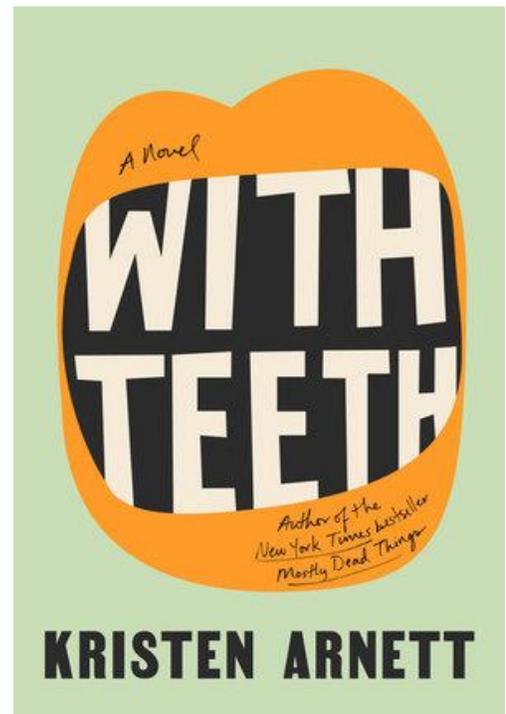
own work. Obviously, this novel was not a memoir, but I was wondering if you were reflected anywhere in it?

**Arnett:** The most ‘me’ that’s in there is place. When I was trying to write central Florida, I was trying to have it be a sensory experience. And the best way I knew how to do that was input my own sensory experience. What does Florida smell like? What do you see? What do you hear?

What are sounds from outside? What does the air feel like? That’s the stuff that comes directly from my own brain because it’s the Florida I’ve experienced. I wanted it to be kind of like what is it like travelling through central Florida, particularly Orlando, and how are the five senses experiencing it. I wanted it to feel deeply physical.

**Interviewer:** Your next novel, *With Teeth*, also focuses on the particular dynamics of one family. What is it about that theme that makes you want to explore it in a novel?

**Arnett:** I am really interested in domestic squabbles. Families are all different but they’re also very similar. There’s like endless conflict and drama and different kinds of stories to mine from families. A thing I think about a lot is the idea of storytelling in households. Right, like, all families have stories. Even the messiest families have stories from growing up; like good, bad stories, funny stories, sad stories and everybody in the household tells them differently. Even if



it's the same story that everyone shares. So, technically, everybody in the household is an unreliable narrator because nobody is telling the same story even though they are.

Families and the domestic are endlessly fascinating to me. I'm especially interested, as a queer person, because I love the idea of looking at what do queer dynamics in families look like. How are they the same? How are they different? What kind of aspects do they share? I think as writers, we're constantly writing the books we want to read. For me, I want to read queer domestic stories and books and essays. That's a topic that's endlessly fascinating to me. Queer stuff, household stuff, family stuff and Florida stuff; that's all really interesting to me.

**Interviewer:** How accessible was queer content for you growing up? I don't mean to imply that you're old, at all, however I think mainstream queer content has only recently come about. There's been a sort of steady increase over the years but even when I was young it felt like a rare occurrence to see queer stories, specifically lesbian. So, I'm curious what your experiences were?

**Arnett:** I think that, for many people, finding queer stuff growing up is like you just kind of find little pockets where you can. Like you watch things and you get the context from it to kind of like put queerness on it, if that makes sense? There are certain movies I watched and I liked them and it wasn't until later that I understood that I was watching it and queering it in my head. I loved the movie *Bring It On* but I was like why am I really into this movie? It's a fun movie but I think it's because I was looking at this dynamic of two cheerleaders that are like really good friends and also have sleepovers and there's queer dynamics embedded, kind of hidden. And that's the kind of thing you had to do when I was growing up. There just wasn't stuff. The stuff

there was, I mean, my family wouldn't let me watch it. My family is very Southern-Baptist, very strict Evangelical Christians. I was constantly really hungry for that kind of content. It is that kind of thing, where if you don't have the things you want to read, you write the things you want to read. It's so nice now that there's so much more and that it continues to grow. But, yeah, you just made your own queer stuff. You either wrote your own or you kind of put queerness on something that wasn't technically queer.

**Interviewer:** I get that too, because even though there is more representation today, I still tend to do that to some things. I find it kind of fun.

**Arnett:** Yeah, no, it's great. And it's a thing that we do because there is queer stuff now but there's still not a ton of it. I mean there's definitely more. But when you're watching stuff, on tv or movies, the main storyline is usually cis, heterosexual and white. So it's like watching things through this specific kind of lens.

Even when trying to get *Mostly Dead Things* published, people were saying, "Well we already have a gay book that we published this year." [Laughs] You see more and more now and that's good because when you have something come out and it's successful, it opens the door. And then you get to open the door for other people to come out and have more queer stuff and different things. My book is a queer book but it's personal, it's a cis, white, lesbian perspective. So, it's exciting to see that more is happening but I think it makes sense that we watch things and queer them ourselves in our heads.

**Interviewer:** Keeping on theme with visual media, would you like to see your writing made into something for tv or film?

**Arnett:** Yeah, I am interested in that. There's stuff that we're doing with that right now – I can't really talk about it. It is something that is hopefully, maybe, going to happen.

**Interviewer:** Oh, wow! That's super exciting. I can't wait to see what that means. I'm deeply interested in the way people choose to title their work. Do you find that the title comes to you while you're working on a story? Or do you begin with a title?

**Arnett:** Anything I ever work on, ever, I have to have a title first. So, like *Mostly Dead Things* was *Mostly Dead Things* before it was a book. *Felt in the Jaw* got named *Felt in the Jaw* because that was the title of the titular story in that book. Anytime I'm writing a short story, the title comes first. If I'm writing an essay the title comes first.

The most interesting thing that happened with *With Teeth* was that it was not called *With Teeth*. That changed happened not that long ago. That was maybe a thing I really wasn't prepared for because I always title work first. I had to talk with my publisher about renaming it because it used to be called *Samson*.

**Interviewer:** And that's the name of one of the main characters in the book, right?

**Arnett:** Yeah, and I had reasoning for it. I liked it as a title. But my publisher also had really compelling reasons why they thought I should re-title it. So, we had conversations over the

phone and I was like okay, I agree. And they agreed to let me to be the one to rename the book so I came up with the new title; which felt good to me. It was still me coming up with it and I liked the new title. But it was strange. Because I never, ever, ever titled anything like that before. I always title first.

**Interviewer:** I guess my final question is about the cover art for your works. I would imagine you play a huge part in picking what is going to be the image on your cover, is that accurate?

**Arnett:** Publishers have their arts department and marketing department and they come up with ideas and they pass those along to you. You get to say if you approve of it or not but both times... Like, when Tin House sent me the cover that they were really interested in for *MDT* it was the cover on the book. It had the pink flamingo and the green and I loved it. It felt absolutely perfect to me. Aside from the fact that flamingos are cool and very Florida, it's an Audubon flamingo. When Audubon painted birds, he would first have them taxidermied and he'd paint from the taxidermy. That felt especially perfect to me. I love how that looked.

Then, with *With Teeth*, they didn't even send me any other ones. My editor, Cal Morgan, at Riverhead sent me an image and was like "this is what we've come up with, I'm interested in your feedback but we all really love it," and I opened up the file and I loved it. I thought it was great. The two books, *MDT* and *With Teeth*, don't look exactly alike but there's kind of a cohesion between the two of them. The fonts are similar, they both have the kind of Florida style-colors going on. The front has an image that could be a Florida image, *With Teeth* has that mouth that also kind of looks like an orange. I think that they are in conversation with each other.

Any author gets to have some veto power when it comes to it but they have an arts department for a reason. They're specialists and they want the look to match what your work should be. So, I was thrilled with both of them. I feel really lucky too, because sometimes people don't like their covers that much. But I love both of mine.