Sandra Belton

In Their Own Country transcript

1 Sandra Belton: As a writer, I basically have two goals. One is to write what I know. And what I know is growing up in America as an African American of middle-class socioeconomic orientation.

Kate Long: That's the voice of Sandra Belton, who grew up in Beckley, West Virginia during the 1950s and 40s.

Sandra: My second goal is to write, with a loving eye, on all children. No matter what the story that has to be told, or the issue that has to be dealt with, it can be dealt with within the spectrum of love, that understanding of the reality of the human condition, and a basic knowledge that we are all human. And in that, we share something together. We just absolutely do. And I would hope that my books, what I write, can wrap their arms around all children.

Kate: And this is *In Their Own Country*, a radio series that celebrates the work and thoughts of some of West Virginia's best writers in their own voices. This time, it's Sandra Belton, accompanied by West Virginia musician Tim Courts on the piano.

2 Kate: Sandra Belton developed her storytelling ability early, on neighborhood porches. A lot of writers heard people telling stories when they were kids. Who did you hear telling stories.

Sandra: I heard a lot of stories on porches. They were stories about times and places, human event stories, rememberies stories that reminded us of who we were. We heard some political stories. We heard lots of commentary about the war, the wars that were going on. We heard stories about the state of things for blacks in Beckley, West Virginia, and in the United States.

Kate: She tackles tough subjects - skin color, divorce, death, black history - by weaving them into stories about kids going about their kid business, fussing with their sisters and brothers, worrying about being fat, playing games, dreaming. As a *Booklist* review said, "Belton addresses serious issues with a very light touch, giving readers a taste of both substance and humor." *The School Library Journal* agreed. "Belton's prose is lyrical and loving ... outstanding in its depth of emotion and evocative depiction of poignant historical moments."

Sandra: All my stories are born in truth and fact of my life, or spring from there into the imagination. Either how it could have been, would have been, should have been, or glad it wasn't (laughs). I'm not sure which. But, for me, that's really important. I can't begin to write about it unless I have some clue as to what it was like.

music

3 **Kate**: When Sandra Belton was a girl in Beckley, West Virginia, in the 1950s and 40s, she couldn't find any books in the library about kids who looked like her. All the storybooks were about white kids.

Sandra: Imagine a society then, imagine these library shelves in which you don't see picture books that have little black girls and little black boys running around, little babies being held up.

Kate: Now she writes those books. And anyone looking for the roots of Sandra Belton, the writer, could start at the Beckley library in the early 1950s.

Sandra: The library was one of the places in our community that wasn't like the movie theater, where we had to go in the same door, but we had to sit upstairs. Wasn't like this park, where we couldn't go in at all. We could pass by and look through the gates at the white kids falling in the pools and so forth. It wasn't like that school only a half a block away from where I lived, that the bus carried the white kids to, where we couldn't go. We had to walk several blocks away to our school.

The library was open to us. Same rules, same guidelines for black kids as white kids. So that was one of the places that we especially liked to go. Plus, the library had shelves of magic that you could browse through and pick something magical to take home with you for a whole week.

It was a place where we could be free and just like everybody else. So we packed that library usually on Saturday and combed those shelves. But there was one thing that was missing, even there. And that was stories about kids. And I was desperate to find stories about kids that were like me, like us. That talked like we did, that looked like we did. The nuances of language, the music, the movements, the way the bodies were in motion. Those things that were uniquely like us, African Americans. Those were the books that were missing in those days.

There was history of course. Every now and then, history about black people. But those special books were missing.

These weren't books that we asked for specifically by definition, like, "Where are the books about the black kids?" This isn't something we did. And maybe we didn't know how to put it in those terms. But we knew they were missing. And I knew they were missing with every *Bobbsey Twins* volume that I read. I loved those stories, but there was something about them that didn't ring true to me.

And the more of those kinds of stories that I wanted to read, the more I did read fairy tales. Because, to me, the fairy tales were without certain descriptions and without certain pictures that limited my ability to imagine.

Kate: You could imagine a black princess…

Sandra: I could imagine a black princess. Now, Rapunzel was tough because Rapunzel's hair was golden, and that pretty much was not in our community. And Rapunzel was so outrageous. Somebody climbing on your hair? Boy, your scalp would have been killing you! And I think I knew that, even then. But the princesses were black in my mind. And the Princess on a Pea? Whoa, she was major black! (laughs) Because I could just see that, all those mattresses and that body so well-attuned to pain, and to comfort, that she could imagine that little lumpy pea. That girl was black. I knew it!

4 **Kate**: I know when I went to the library, I was always looking for stories about kids who were like me - shy, awkward kids.

Sandra: I think that's what most of us want. Books, like everything else, to reflect us. I think that things that mirror you help you have a greater acceptance of yourself, across the board.

For example: I remember when TV was first everywhere, which was, in our community, the mid-fifties. When TV was first available, whenever there was a black person, let's say, on one of those game shows, the phone lines were hot. "Turn on channel whatever! There's a black woman on The Price is Right!" This was very common. And such joy at seeing this reflection of yourself, this reality. You too were a part of it. I mean, there were not black people - just think about it. The billboard ads which were everywhere. You didn't see black people. Yet we were big consumers.

I think that many people can understand it from the point of the roles of women. The way women were portrayed. When you saw a woman, she wasn't in a room with people making decisions about a business. She was in the kitchen with an apron on. This is unfair. And it wasn't great for black kids to not see themselves.

Kate: I don't think it was good for the white kids either. I was a little kid growing up 15 miles away from you. And you know, I should have been learning that people of all colors are a normal part of the world. And I didn't see it in books. I didn't see it on TV.

Sandra: You're absolutely right. It's necessary for a healthy world, to have reflections of a world that embraces everybody everywhere, in all kinds of roles. This is an affirmation of the equality of people.

5 **Kate**: And now Sandra Belton is writing the books she wishes she could have found at that library. Her *Ernestine and Amanda* series, for instance, stars two talented girls - rivals and sort-of friends - who squabble, dream, worry about being fat, cope with parents who get divorced, the kind of things that any kid might face. These two kids happen to be African American.

Here are the two rivals fussing with each other:

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6 *"You oughta say what you mean, Amanda. Then I wouldn't have to read your mind."*

"What's all this "Read your mind" mess? How come you can't just answer my question?

"Maybe because you didn't ask a question. What you asked was –"

"Forget it, Ernestine! Just forget it!"

"Forget what? You haven't said anything for me to forget, Amanda."

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Kate: And there they are!

7 **Kate:** In the *Ernestine and Amanda* books, the two girls take turns telling the story. In this next scene, Ernestine is talking. From *Ernestine and Amanda: Summer Camp, Ready or Not.* Ernestine is talking here. Her dad has lost his job.

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Mama and Daddy are always holding hands and doing mushy stuff like that. Sometimes I think they look kind of icky, but watching them always makes me feel good inside, like seeing how they were in the chair. I started feeling better, even without knowing any reasons why I should.

It was raining outside, and coming down hard. The globs of rainwater collected in the drainpipes made big, splashing sounds when they fell on the ground. Shlup shlup shlup. For a long time, the splashing was all I heard. Nobody said anything. Mama kind of looked at Daddy, and Daddy kept looking at his hands and bending and unbending his fingers. Then after what seemed like forever, he cleared his throat, looked at the three of us on the couch and started talking.

"Kids, there's no easy way to break bad news. I've always contended that the best way is to get on with it. So that's exactly what I'm going to do. Just get on with it."

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Kate: And so then he tells them. He's lost his job.

8 **Kate**: And now here's another sample, from that same book. Amanda talking this time. Each of these girls has her own heartache to deal with. Amanda is writing a letter to her lawyer father, George Clay. He has just moved out of the house, separating from her mother. Now he wants her and her sister to come have lunch with him, to talk. Amanda doesn't want to go. It just hurts too much. She's making up an excuse, writing him a letter.

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Sandra*: Dear Attorney Clay. I can't come to lunch. Thanks for inviting me anyway. I hope you have a good meal. Yours truly, Amanda Clay.*

I read what I had written. It wasn't right. So I tore the letter up and started again. "Dear George, Thank you for inviting me to have lunch with you. But I'm very busy and won't be able to come. When school starts, I'll be even busier than I am now. So I don't know when I'll be able to see you. Maybe I won't be too busy to see you next summer. Sincerely, Amanda.

The letter wasn't right still. So I balled it up and took out another clean sheet of stationery. It was the last piece in the box, so I knew I'd have to get it right this time.

Dear Father, I'm sorry I can't come to lunch, but I'm a little sick. I don't think it's anything serious, since my temperature keeps coming down. It was very high last night, almost 110 degrees, I think. But it's lower now, and that means I'm getting better. It's probably something I caught at camp. It may be the same thing two of the girls I lived with caught, just before we had to leave to come home. One of them almost died, but both of them got better finally. So my being sick is nothing you should worry about. It's a good thing I won't be coming to lunch, because every time I get close to food, I throw up. And I know you'll have a good lunch anyway with Madelyn. Your other daughter, Amanda.

I read the letter three times to make sure it was right. Then I folded it and put it in one of the envelopes.

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Those two scenes could happen to a kid of any color. But Ernestine and Amanda also have many experiences that spring directly out of black culture or realities.

9 **Kate:** In this next sample, Ernestine - who plays piano by ear - is playing for a girls' dance class so her little sister can get free lessons. Amanda and the other skinny girls are in the class. Ernestine feels chubby and resentful.

Her mother and other mothers have pooled their money to hire the dance teacher because the town's dance studio is just for white girls. So this is the first session with Miss Davis.

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Sandra*: Miss Davis started talking again. "Spirituals are a magnificent art form, born of our people," she said. W.E.B. DuBois has called them our sorrow songs. This description of spirituals often comes to my mind when I listen to them. I find myself full of wonder, thinking how such beauty could come from so much pain.*

It got so quiet in the room while she was talking, I could almost hear people breathing. Miss Davis went over to the record player again. "I'm going to play the same music again," she said.

"I want you to listen carefully, just as before, but this time with your eyes open. Because as I listen this time, I'm going to express with my body how this song makes me feel."

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Kate: And Miss Davis began dancing to the old spiritual, "There is a Balm in Gilead." It goes like this. Sandra Belton is singing.

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Sandra sings*: There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.*

When the music started, Miss Davis closed her eyes and stretched out her arms, very slowly. Then she started kind of pulling something from the air, like she had found something she wanted to pour over her. While she was pouring, the expression on her face moved into a smile. I could feel a smile coming on my face, and I didn't care if anybody was watching me or not. How Miss Davis was moving her body was amazing. It was beautiful.

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Kate: So then Miss Davis asks the kids to dance. Ernestine is playing the piano for the dancing class. And she's telling the story here.

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Sandra: *Amanda had closed her eyes like Miss Davis had done. Only you could tell, she wasn't trying to imitate the teacher. Instead of having her arms stretched out, Amanda had hers wrapped around herself. For a while, she stayed like that in one spot, holding herself while she kind of rocked her body. Every now and then, she would drop her head back hard and roll it around. "Wow. She's acting like she really has been wounded and is trying to put herself together again."*

Watching Amanda made me feel something extra inside. I wanted to make what I was feeling show in the music. Keeping my eyes on Amanda helped me do that. She started twirling. At first it was slow. Then she started going faster, and then even faster. Her dance outfit whipped around her so fast, you could almost hear it. Amanda started spinning out of the group and around the room. Her movements were so fast, and so good, that the other girls stopped their own dancing to give her more room. They started watching her.

Near the last part of the song, Amanda stopped. It was all of the sudden, like she had heard someone yell, FREEZE. After a little while, she brought her arms up real slow and wrapped them around herself again. She dropped her head back again, but this time very slowly. And then she stood, very, very still.

Amanda was amazing. She looked beautiful while she was dancing. All of the sudden, everybody started clapping and looking at Amanda. And at me! I was surprised, because I hadn't figured we were performing or anything even close. But hearing all that clapping was nice.

Then Miss Davis grabbed one of my hands and one of my hands and made us bow together. "You two make a great team," she said.

I took a bow, and so did Amanda. But I didn't say one word, and neither did she.

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Kate: (laugh) So those two get thrown together, despite themselves.

Sandra: Yep!

music

10 **Kate**: The Ernestine and Amanda series includes books with names like *Ernestine and Amanda: Mysteries on Monroe Street*, and *Ernestine and Amanda, Members of the C.L.U.B.* Sandra Belton figures she'll take these two into their late teens.

As she tells their stories, she mentions historical events and figures in African American history. And at the end of each Ernestine and Amanda book, there is a kid-type scrapbook that tells a little about each historical figure, place or event mentioned in that book. For instance, the scrapbook at the end of the book with the dance scene includes pictures of Katherine Dunham, the great African American dancer, a lead sheet for the spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead," a picture from a segregated school, and pictures from the Civil Rights movement, with notes to make kids think, like "Can you imagine being taken to and from school by soldiers?"

11 **Kate**: Why is it important for young people to know about what came before them, their heroes in history?

Sandra: The more kids know about what was, the more they can affect what will be. And in the case of black kids - and this phrase, or some variation of it, appears in every *Ernestine and Amanda* book - you don't know where you're going until you know where you have been. I so believe in that. And I especially believe in it for black people in America whose history is not as well-known as it should be.

Real people and events in African American history are part of Ernestine and Amanda because they were part of my life, our lives. We went to schools named after black people. There was W.E.B. DuBois High School in Mount Hope, West Virginia. We had as a part of every Friday afternoon, black history. It wasn't black history then, it was called Negro history. And the thickest book we had was our Negro history book. A green book with gold lettering, "Negro History," right on the cover.

We knew about the black community from which we came. We knew about it from that - I think it was an hour and a half - every Friday afternoon in seventh and eighth grade. We knew about it because of the discussions that went around our dinner tables. They were mentions in the church services. They were the discussions that took place in the drug store. We know it today because it is so available in other places as well. But then we knew it because it was deliberately discussed, deliberately told.

music

Kate: And today, she loves to meet young African American fans who see themselves mirrored in the books she writes.

12 **Sandra**: One evening in the summer, my husband and I were coming from dinner in the neighborhood, walking down the street near our home, when we noticed a new book store opening up for kids. And as we passed by, they were actually sweeping out, getting ready for the opening, which was I guess the next day. And I noticed in the window a copy of an *Ernestine and Amanda* book. And of course, I was just joyous. My husband said he was not going to walk down the street with someone who was skipping (laughing)! I was just thrilled.

And the woman, the owner, was standing there, and she came out, and she actually recognized me, partially from the picture, author picture on the jacket, but partially from this woman acting like a fool in front of her shop! And she said, "Are you Sandra Belton?" Then she called her niece, who was in the back helping out.

And her niece - African American also - came out. And she introduced her to me and said, "Here's your favorite author." And in that moment of introduction, I was looking in the child's face, and I saw that most wonderful spark of total delight that you can only see in someone's eyes at the very second it is being experienced. And I was thrilled beyond measure. And had every wonderful thing all wrapped in a glimpse that I would want as an author.

It was something that took me through time, and I saw what I would have loved to have felt in my heart as a reader, by reading a book about me at that time. And I said, "Well, lookahere. Look at the blessing you just got."

Kate: So you're not only doing things for kids now. You're doing something for yourself, as a kid.

Sandra: Oh heavens, yes.

13 **Kate**: Did you ever imagine that you would be doing anything like this when you were a kid? Did you dream of it?

Sandra: Actually, as a child, I was shy. I think I'm still pretty shy.

Kate: Did you have a special place where you went to dream when you were a kid?

Sandra: No, I didn't have a special place. It was always there. It was with me all the time, and it could come out whenever I needed it. When I was sitting in church, squeezed in between some adults who were making me be still, it could come in and take me away. In school, when I thought I could never bear another sound of that droning voice that wouldn't let us DO something, but just sit there, it saved me from getting in trouble. When I was a teenager watching the boy I thought was just, ooo, so cool, make eyes at the girl that I hated, it transported me to someplace where I was the center of attention.

So that special dreaming place has always been in my head. And it could come out anywhere, any time.

14 **Kate**: Would you paint us a picture of the neighborhood in Beckley, West Virginia where you grew up?

Sandra: Basically, I lived on a street between two other streets. And half of all of those streets belonged to black people. The other half, the halves closer to town, belonged to white people. That meant that halfway up the streets, you ran from black to white.

In the black halves of the streets, there were families of all kinds. Our community had every socio-economic level in it. There were teachers, doctors, lawyers, people who did day service for white people who lived in the ritzy section of town. There was a boarding house. There were black businessmen who owned their own businesses. There were coal miners. Everybody was in the same place, one reason being that they had no other choices.

Kate: And this was in the 1950s and '40s.

Sandra: Yes. This was a segregated area. These streets had beautiful homes, up and down the streets. And one beautiful house was owned by a black, next to another beautiful home by a white. And there was separation that was complete. They were neighbors in that they lived next door to each other, but that was the end of it, for the most part.

Kate: Did the white kids play with the black kids?

Sandra: Nope. And the black kids didn't play with the white kids.

music

Sandra: We played all the regular childhood games. I especially loved to chase fireflies. But I think my favorite was statues. Statues is that game where you get yourself twirled around and around, then your partner lets you go. And as you're let go you, you've been thinking, "What am I going to fall as?" Sometimes you'd fall into the position of a monster, or you were in great pain, or you had just died, whatever. You could be ruler of the universe. You could be empress.

You could be a person filled with magic. You could fly. I loved it because I guess it was so much fun to pretend.

15 **Kate**: I can picture those three streets of people of different professions. I'm trying to picture you in the middle of that.

Sandra: What you can picture there is a chubby little girl who was supposed to wear her glasses all the time and usually didn't. A gap between her teeth, which I *hated.* I always smiled with my tongue stuck between that gap. Thick hair with two braids that curled up all the time, except when I hung clothespins on them to keep them from curling up. Very good on a bike because I could close my eyes and pretend to fly. And, mmm, especially good at rolling down a hill.

A little girl who was alone a lot, because I was an only child. I loved to read. And I liked to make up my own stuff.

Kate: But she was never really alone.

Sandra: Everybody knew everybody.

16 **Sandra:** The neighbors were the community. if you messed up in school, you could be pretty sure that by the time you got home, it was known, and you were in for trouble both ways, at school and at home.

The often-repeated phrase, it takes a village to raise a child, that was very characteristic of our community, a community that often did come together at the best time of day to share. People were on those porches: the young, the old, the tired, the bored, the excited, the blasé, we were there on the porches, sharing. That's the community I remember.

Kate: And no surprise, Sandra Belton's first book is about older people on a porch, telling neighborhood kids stories about their lives.

17 **Kate:** And here's a section of *From Miss Ida's Porch*

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There's a very best time of day on Church Street, my street. It begins when the sky and my feelings match, both kind of rosy around the edges.

You can hear all the best-time noises - Shoo Kate and Mr. Fisher laughing from their kitchen. Reginald and T-Bone slamming out their back door. Mr. Porter coming home from work in his noisy old car, calling out to everybody he passes on the street. Netta practicing on her piano *(mostly to get out of washing dinner dishes), and Mr. Willie making his just-checkin'-on call to Mrs. Jackson, his ninety-year-old mama.*

The noises feel good.

Most of the big kids are getting ready to hang out somewhere, like at the drug store down on the corner. Or on the steps in front of the church. Those are some of their favorite pretending places. The boys pretend not to see the girls, and the girls pretending to ignore the boys. Like my sister Sylvia, pretending to ignore Peewee.

Most of the little kids are getting ready to get ready for bed. Getting ready for bed takes a long time for the little kids. Some of them can make it last all the way to the end of the best time - especially the Tolliver kids. "Just give more minutes, Mama please?" they say. Then, after five minutes, they hide somewhere in the yard for five more minutes. Then they start pleading all over again for five more minutes.

But most of the kids on Church Street are in between kids, like Frieda and me. Some of the best times, we just sit on her porch or mine, playing jacks or reading comics. Sometimes we play statues with Rosetta and Punkin and Rodney.

Most of the times, though, just about all of us end up at Miss Ida's. Sitting on her porch.

Miss Ida's house is halfway down Church Street. That's probably one reason folks end up there a lot. Another reason is Miss Ida herself. She and the best time are kind of alike. Soft, peaceful.

But the biggest reason we all end up there is that Miss Ida's porch is a telling place.

Usually, Mr. Fisher comes over to sit on the porch about the same time we do. It's about the time the sky is getting rosy all over. You know then that the best time is settling in.

Miss Ida calls Mr. Fisher "Poissant" because they both come from Louisiana and that's what people there used to call him.

Mr. Fisher has been all over. It's hard to tell how old he is. But from all the stuff he's done, he could be really old. He doesn't look old at all, though. Especially when he walks. He sorta bounces. Miss Ida always says, "Poissant has a jaunty step."

Mr. Fisher has lots of memories about the places he's been and things he's seen. Almost anything can make him think about something he saw or heard or did a while back. He'll start out, "Puts my mind on the time..." and we know what's coming.

"Tell us about that time, Poissant," Miss Ida will say to Mr. Fisher when he begins his remembering. And he will.

Like the time Frieda and Punkin were arguing about what Mrs. Jackson had said when she was over at Punkin's house, visiting Miss Esther, Punkin's aunt.

"Lena Horne ain't never visited Miz Jackson, Punkin," Freda said. "Miz Jackson was just talking outta her head, girl. You know she ninety years old. You crazy for believing her."

"You don't know anything, Freda." Punkin was getting angry. "Just 'cause Miz Jackson's ninety don't mean she talking outta her head. Most time Miz Jackson make more sense than you!"

Punkin and T-Bone almost fell over laughing. Me too. And this made Frieda fighting mad.

"Hold on there, Miss Lady," said Mr. Fisher, taking hold of Frieda's hands. "Don't press ugly on that pretty face. Tell me now, how come you think Lena Horne couldn't have stayed at Mrs. Jackson's house?"

"'Cause Lena Horne is famous. Why would she want to stay at Miz Jackson's?"

"Why not?" Mr. Fisher settled back in his chair.

I had a feeling that some remembering was getting started.

"Used to be that most all the famous black folks who came to town stayed at somebody's house."

"How come, Mr. Fisher?" Frieda sat on the stoop in front of Mr. Fisher.

"Nowhere else for them to stay! Couldn't stay in hotels. Hotels didn't allow no black guests! Famous or not. When our folk came to town to give a speech, put on a show, or whatever they came to do, we had to be the ones to give 'em a bed.

"Puts my mind on a time back in thirty-nine. I was working in West Virginia then. Working in the mines. Lived in a nice town close to where I worked. Lots of good folks there, working hard to make a life for themselves and their children."

Mr. Fisher's remembering was making him smile.

"Anyhow, a big dance took place in the town every year. Folks came from all around to go to this dance. That year, 1939, the dance was really going to be special. Duke Ellington was coming to town. The great bandman himself was coming to play for the dance."

The best time noises were still there, but they had changed. You could hear the chirping bugs. One of the Tolliver kids was crying, probably asking for something he couldn't have. Mr. Willie was playing his radio. Jazz.

Mr. Fisher was still remembering. "Yessir. The great Duke Ellington was coming to play for us, for our dance, and there was not one hotel in the state that would put him up and take his money for doin' it. If he had a mind to rest himself in a bed, it was goin' have to be in the home of some black person."

"Did he stay with you, Mr. Fisher?" Punkin asked.

"Not with me, exactly, but in the house where I was living. Mrs. Lomax's house. Mrs. Lomax had a big, fine house, and she kept it real nice. I rented a room on the third floor."

Mr. Fisher started to grin, like he always did when he got to a part he liked to tell.

"I was there when the great man arrived with three of his bandsmen."

"So you got to meet Duke Ellington?" T-Bone was impressed. We all were.

"I not only met him, I was there when he sat at the piano in Mrs. Lomax's parlor. Duke's playing heated up that little room. I'm telling you it did. He was some kinda good!"

Mr. Fisher grew quiet, a remembering quiet. He stopped smiling too. "Humph. Imagine that. A man like that. Talented, famous, everything! Not being able to pay his own money to sleep in a crummy little hotel room, just because he was black."

After that, we were all quiet. I was wishing I knew more about what Mr. Fisher was remembering. I bet Frieda was wishing so too.

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Kate: And the book goes on from there: older people passing the stories down to younger people.

18 **Sandra**: The sharing of the community from every age of the community is very much in the African tradition. The old informing the young. The sharing on the porch is like that of the African girot - African storyteller.

Kate: And as always, you can find the seed for that story in Sandra Belton's life.

19 **Sandra**: When I was 5 years old. Phillipa Duke Skyla, who was a child prodigy, came to perform in Beckley, sponsored by one of the civic and social groups there. When she was six, I think, she appeared in the New York Philharmonic with one of her own compositions. Very well known, certainly, in the black community.

Phillipa was the product of an interracial marriage. Her father was African American, and her mother white. And this of course meant that her mother could stay in the hotel in town, but not her. So the organization asked that she stay in my home.

And when I first laid eyes on this little girl, I was thrilled, because not only was she beautiful, but she had a gap between her two front teeth. And it just thrilled my little five-year-old heart.

Phillipa practiced, of course, on my piano in our den. And I sneaked into the room, and as soon as I came in, Phillipa, in her ten-year-old heart wanting to please this five-year-old, began to play boogie woogie for me. And her mother rushed in and rushed me out and said, “Oh, Phillipa’s practicing now.” And after her mom left, I went back in, but this time, I had the good sense to hide.

20 **Sandra:** So I had firsthand reference of this reality of black America during those times.

Kate: Her father helped her decide how to react to these realities. When she was young, for instance, she loved to go to the movies.

Sandra: And we’d walk in the door, get our popcorn or candy, then we headed up to the balcony. Now, we didn’t ever head downstairs, because we knew we couldn’t sit down there, because that was just for the white kids, or the white people.

One day I asked my dad why he never went to the movies, because he was really missing some good stuff. And he said, well, he never went because he didn’t have a choice of where he could sit. I said, “You could sit in the balcony. Those are the great seats.”

He said, “That might be.” But he couldn’t choose to sit anywhere else. And he wasn’t going to spend his money in a place that he didn’t have the choice of where to sit.

I thought about that, and I said, “Well, why do you let me go?” He said, “Well, now that you know about this, maybe you’ll choose not to go.” I thought about that, and I chose not to go. So. I stopped going to the movies. I know I didn’t return until I was sixteen or close, when the movie theater became integrated and blacks could sit wherever they wanted to.

21 **Kate**: Sandra Belton’s novel for young people, *McKendree*, published in the year 2000, is set in West Virginia.

Sandra: West Virginia gives you something rich in your spirit. It gives you something deep to draw from. I cannot imagine having grown up in a more spiritual place, actually. Something about the mountains. There’s a gentleness, there’s a calmness. Maybe it’s a realization of being there among things that are so clearly defined by things greater than human beings.

When I was writing *McKendree*, I actually had pictures of West Virginia surrounding my computer. I had a huge picture of the New River Park that was in front of my computer.

22 **Kate**: Sandra's father was a doctor who made house calls in the black community. He also had white patients who came to his house. And he was the doctor for McKendree, an old folks home for black people on the banks of the New River in Fayette County, West Virginia.

Sandra set a large part of her book there. The main character of *McKendree*, fifteen-year-old Tilara, is from Boston, where her dad is a minister of a big church. He grew up in Fayette County. Tilara has come to spend the summer in Fayette County with her Aunt Cloelle, who works part time at the old folks home, McKendree.

23 Tilara's skin is very dark. She doesn't think she could possibly be pretty. Her African American mom – who had very light skin – died when she was not yet two years old. And here's part of Tilara's story:

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Sandra: *Tilara had grown up looking at reflections of someone she had been told was the loveliest woman who ever lived, a person whose pictures lined the wall along the stairs and almost filled the top of the piano in the living room. Someone whose portrait showed skin the color of cream, hair that hung to her waist in silky brown curls, and wide eyes the color of grey smoke.*

The pictures were of Tilara's mother, the woman Papa still talked to through the pictures. "Do you remember her eyes, T?" Papa would ask as he smiled at the person in the dining room portrait. "Smoking pearls, I used to call them."

He would chuckle. "You liked hearing that, didn't you, Lindy?" he would say to the portrait, seeming to forget that it was Tilara who was at the table with him, and not Belinda Cross Haynes, who had died when her daughter was not yet two years old.

She had stood in front of the portrait many times, commanding it to bring a memory of her mother. But the picture only echoed the words she had heard her father say again and again, "Lindy was what you would call a beautiful woman. A truly beautiful woman."

Her father's words and the everywhere pictures told Tilara that she could never be pretty. Being pretty was to look like the unplayed-with china white baby dolls that slept on the shelves of Tilara's closet, images she saw as the opposite of herself.

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Sandra: All of us can be free if we believe in who we are and know that we are OK because of who we are. But often the society - and this is especially the case for kids - we keep getting these messages that tell us that we are not OK. In Tilara's case, she had no clue that she was absolutely beautiful because the society's message to her was because she was so dark, she couldn't possibly be beautiful.

24 **Kate**: And in *McKendree*, Sandra Belton explored a delicate issue.

Sandra: I hope to bring to light in *McKendree* how the color issue in the black community has been, and still is I think to some degree, a crippling thing. How buying the idea that lighter is better is sort of related to a greater theme in society of how a physical attribute gives you more success than another physical attribute.

Simply stated in *McKendree*, in the time recaptured there of 1948, a light-skinned black person, given that condition alone, often had more success than a person darker. The lighter-skinned kid might be the one picked to greet the principal for the class, might be the one picked to play the part of the princess, as opposed to the handmaiden. This is a reality.

Kate: Was it like that when you were a kid?

Sandra: Yes, it was like that. I think to some degree, we have some residuals of that. Nor is that a condition that is unique to the black community. Think about the girls who were ironing their hair in the sixties to make it long and straight. Or the girls who became blondes. Because, the blondes, don't they have more fun?

Kate: In *McKendree*, a bunch of African America teenagers - including Tilara - volunteer at McKendree, the old folks home. Some are dark-skinned, some light. The question of skin color comes up in their romances and in their conversations with the old people at McKendree. Here, they're talking with Mr. Reese, grandson of a slave.

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Your grandfather w-worked in the house?" Braxton was sitting on a stool beside Mr. Reese.

"Lord, no!" Mr. Reese's voice crackled. "My granddaddy was too black to work in the big house. They liked to keep the light skins to house slaves."

"See there, Braxton?" Thumb said from his spot next to the railing. "You'd have been out of luck on the plantation. Stuck out in the fields doing hard labor."

"What makes you think any of it w-wasn't hard labor?" Braxton's dark eyes flashed. "At least black was an honorable color."

"What are you talking about, man?" Thumb's eyes narrowed.

"Think about it, Thumb," Olivia said, her voice flying and her words commanding. "Think about all the African woman on the plantations that were, were -"

"Dishonored," Cloelle offered, patting Olivia on her shoulder.

"Yeah! Dishonored!" Olivia smiled at Choelle. "Thanks, Miss Haynes," she said. "And then think about the results," she added, looking at Thumb.

"Let Mr. Reese g-go on, y'all." Braxton moved his stool closer to the old man.

"It's going, it's going," Mr. Reese said, quickening the rocking motion of the chair. "All this stuff you younguns are talking about is part of the story."

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Sandra: Standards of beauty didn't just come from nowhere. They are definitely based on a lot of things. The standard of "lighter is better," it has historical roots in a lot of ways, one of which is addressed in *McKendree*.

25 **Sandra:** Writing about skin color within the African community has been referred to as airing dirty laundry I think, to some degree. But it is important to write about things that are issues and that are problems and that are hurts. A world free of problems would be a world, I think, without a lot of books (laughs). But much of our humanness, we get in touch with much of our humanness, I think, through the things that we read and the things that we look at and certainly the things that we hear.

Kate: I know, if I were a kid, reading that book, and reading about those kids working through that problem: encountering it, being hurt by it, dealing with it, taking action.

Sandra: Maybe the least thing that it can do is say "You are not alone." I don't know about helping you through it, but knowing that you're not alone is the beginning of something.

26 **Kate**: I've heard some writers say that, when it's going well, you aren't exactly in control.

Sandra: Absolutely. When I'm in control, it's less powerful. When I release control, the writing is much better. It's very clear. Even I can see that. One of the best examples I have had, to date, has been what happened when I was working on the first *Ernestine and Amanda* book.

I work with an outline, so I knew I was at the place where Amanda finds out that her parents are about to get separated. And I really was trying to think, "OK, how is Amanda feeling here?" And I was twirling around in my chair trying to figure it out. And suddenly I turned around to the computer and my hands typed a word. Mawyn. M-a-w-y-n. I looked at it. And then it came to me what it was.

Kate: "Mawyn" was the name Amanda had called her sister Madelyn when she was little. And Madelyn was going to tell her their parents were separated. As soon as Sandra got that little clue in her mind, she began writing rapidly.

Sandra: Soon as I started writing, it started coming. I felt these little chills in my body, I realized they were like tiny, freezing feet.

Kate: You felt them while you were writing?

Sandra: I felt the tiny freezing feet, and I knew that's what Amanda was feeling, and this is how Amanda described it. I really could feel it.

Kate: And here's part of what she wrote:

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27 *Madelyn held my hands with hers. "Amanda - Mother and Dad are getting a, getting a separation."*

I could feel the freezing little feet coming across my shoulders and down into my chest. They were pushing on me and keeping me from thinking about what I should say. Madelyn was squeezing my hands. She started talking faster. "This isn't really a surprise. We both knew something like this was probably going to happen. It's just that, it's something that we don't want it to happen. But the way things have been lately, I don't know any more f it should or shouldn't happen. You know what I mean, don't you Amanda?"

Everything I could feel was pushing on me. Madelyn's hands squeezing mine and the freezing little feet that seemed to be stomping everywhere. I could even feel them near my heart, pushing at my chest.

A funny sound flew out of my mouth when I opened it to let my breath out. It sounded like a laugh and a cry at the same time. It was weird, but it had made all the pushing stop.

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Kate: So she tells her sister she's OK.

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Sandra: *With the pushing gone, it was easy to breathe again, especially if I didn't think too much about it. "You'll be fine. You will. Just wait. You'll see."*

The little voice I could inside sounded like my voice, but I knew it wasn't. In the first place, I knew it wasn't going to be fine. Nothing was, maybe not ever again. I wanted to scream out loud and tell the voice to shut up. But I didn't. I just smiled at Madelyn and said she should hurry up, because it was almost time for us to leave.

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Sandra: I got a letter from a child, a little boy who said, "You write pretty good." He liked the story. And he said that that part where I was telling how Amanda felt when she heard that her parents were getting a separation was REALLY good. And he knew, because that's how he felt when it happened to him. And I want you to know, it doesn't get any better than that, the word from a kid.

28 **Kate**: When I interviewed Sandra Belton at her Chicago home, she was getting ready to write another *Ernestine and Amanda* book.

Sandra: I had been putting off writing the next *Ernestine and Amanda* book for quite some time, because I always knew that book was going to be an important turning place, and it was going to deal with death. More serious than some of the other books, although lost jobs and separation and divorce are very serious issues which children face. But death on their level is really, really tough.

I am ready now, I think, to write this book. And it's going to help me, in many ways, sort through a very devastating period in my own life, because of a loss.

Kate: The death of somebody very close to her.

Sandra: So I am looking forward and dreading the writing of this book at the same time. I think I now bring an understanding that I never had before, not even close to. I will know something that I didn't know several months ago that will definitely inform the telling of this story. And if I'm true to this, I will write something in turn that will offer something very powerful to my readers.

music:

29 **Kate**: You know, your books are something like front porches. In your childhood, people sat around on front porches, and the older people passed down to the younger people what they knew. You're doing that with your books.

Sandra: Well, thank you. I think that's a wonderful thing. Front porches that I remember were safe, wonderful and loving places. And that would be what I hoped to do. I like that analogy.

Kate: And we've been visiting with Sandra Belton, who grew up in Beckley, West Virginia and has written one nationally praised children's book after another. I'm Kate Long, and this is In Their Own Country, a weekly series featuring West Virginia writers. Thanks for listening.

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In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Music is performed by Timothy Courts. Bob Webb recorded the music and supplied production assistants. Francis Fisher provided technical mentoring and production assistance.