

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Mini-Episode 7: Books about Dogs

(Brief intro music)

Leah: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Leah, one of your co-hosts. Welcome to another mini-episode that I got to record in my living room. Rachel and I thought we'd highlight different books or TV shows or just things that make us happy to help keep you entertained. I hope you've been enjoying these so far. I know we've enjoyed making them. Last week, I talked about my favorite movies. This week, I'm jumping back to books. So, we're going to be talking about dogs. I have a giant soft spot for them. They make me gasp when I see them walking around living their best dog lives, and I sure hope that my future involves getting a good dog of my very own. That means, of course, that I have a soft spot for literature about dogs. So today, listeners, I'd like to tell you about some of my favorite books that feature doggos. First up, a serious tear-jerker. I mean it. I think I cried just about the whole way through the book. Which, now that I think of it, is obviously a really great selling point to start with. It's just one of those books that hits you in the feels. It's called "Thunder Dog" by Michael Hingson. It's the absolutely true story of the amazing guide dog, Roselle, who guided her human, Michael Hingson, down from the 78th floor of the North tower of the World Trade Center. It's a firsthand account from a survivor of those tragic events on 9/11. I certainly remember exactly where I was when news of this broke: second hour World History at Waukesha West High School. I think we all remember. But to read this firsthand account and think about all of the innocent lives lost, it kept me tearing up the whole book. And I won't lie, guys: I read it again so it'd be fresh for me to write this up, and I ugly cried practically the whole time. I even cried writing this up and kept wondering if I should pick a different book, something more lighthearted. But hearing stories like Michael's are important, and hey, it must be well written if it draws me in enough to ugly cry over it every time. So, I'm not sure how much background I need to dive into about 9/11, but here are some basics. On September 9th, 2001, 4 planes were hijacked. 2 planes were rerouted by the hijackers to hit the World Trade center, the first striking the North tower between floors 93 and 99. The second struck the South tower between the floors 77 and 85. The third hijacked plane hit the Pentagon, and the fourth was stopped short of completing its attack by the passengers on board who rushed the cockpit and forced the hijackers to crash early. Needless to say, this was a really impactful, hurtful, and devastating day for not just a whole lot of families but for the whole country. There were so many lives lost. That is the barest overview of the events, but if you do want more details I'll include a link in the show notes to an Encyclopedia Britannica article about the attacks. Now, the author does a really great job of utilizing flashbacks and interjections to help you not cry the whole time. Anyone who knows my reading preferences knows that I don't really like flashbacks. I like a nice, clean timeline. But in this book? Absolutely, positively necessary. Not just to provide a little relief from the heavy topic, but to give us some background. The American Federation for the Blind reports that only 44% of the blind population is employed in the workforce compared to 79% of the general population. Michael Hingson was/is part of that 44%. Using these flashbacks, he describes his childhood and how his parents never gave up on helping him integrate into the sighted world. He embraced having a guide dog to help him navigate, and throughout his life he—and this is a direct quote—"decided to live out the rest of his life on the 'why not' principle." In 2001, Michael worked on the 78th floor of the North tower of the World

Trade Center. He describes how that day unfolded in the book. The chaos, the uncertainty, and the panic that many of his coworkers and fellow evacuees felt. It's a really powerful story, and I don't want to spoil too much of it in case you guys do want to read it, but I absolutely will say that both Michael and Roselle made it out and home safely. Let's move on to my next doggo pick, which is slightly more of a feel-good story. Slightly. The copy of the book I have is actually an uncorrected proof that I picked up at the 2017 American Library Association conference in Chicago, Illinois. I was so excited to attend this conference—not only because it was my first American Library Association conference but because I had librarian friends from around the country also attending. Now, I couldn't afford to attend the entire conference, but I was lucky enough to get a free pass admitting me to the exhibition hall. In the exhibition hall you can find all sorts of booths, from publishers to library schools to vendors who provide library services. At these conferences, publishers will hand out advanced reading copies—or ARCs—of upcoming books. I was wandering the hall, trying not to be so shy and introverted in such a large, crowded space when I saw a doggo at one of the publisher booths. I beelined it there, because hello, I wanted to pet the dog, thanks. Turns out that particular dog, who was very happy to receive some pets, was named Fred. And Fred's human was named Craig Grossi who wrote a very nice book entitled "Craig & Fred: A Marine, A Stray Dog, and How They Rescued Each Other." It's a good book, guys. Craig really has a way of writing, of painting such a clear picture. This is another book that had me in tears for a good part of it, mostly because I'm super empathetic. I have zero frame of reference for what it's like to be in a combat zone. I'm a librarian who has spent her life in school or at a library. But Craig described the time that he spent in Afghanistan—the landscape, the people, his squad—and he made it so real. When Craig was stationed in Afghanistan, he was out of Camp Leatherneck. His squad was inserted into San...Sangin? Where he was gathering intelligence from villagers and patrolling. Their base of operations was infiltrated by a funny-looking dog searching for food. Craig won him over and named him Fred. Fred soon became beloved by the whole team, but if anyone up the chain of command found out about Fred he would be euthanized. Craig was able to find a few key people who were willing to help, to risk a whole lot for this doggo, and get Fred home to his family. I don't think that's too much of a spoiler to say, because I already led with the fact that I met Fred at the American Library Association conference in Chicago in 2017. Obviously, he made it over here. When I was reading though...even though I've met the dog, I was still on the edge of my seat wondering how things were going to turn out. If that's not a sign of a well written, engaging book, I don't know what is. I'd also just like to mention that this is both a book that is set in a war zone and with a former member of the military adjusting to civilian life again. There are descriptions of attacks and violence and loss. Craig did a really good job of interjecting his cross-country 'finding his civilian self' road trip that he took after getting out of the military to relieve a bit of that intensity. The author himself describes it perfectly: "There's some real material in here that can get a little tough, and it was important for me to write it." Before I found that quote from the author, while I was reading it I told my boyfriend that it felt important to read it, to which he responded that it was important for me to talk about it here, then. So, here we are! If you guys are interested in Fred, he has his very own Facebook page, Fred the Afghan. And I'm not entirely sure if it's because of this pandemic, but there is a series on the page where Craig with his wife Nora and Fred himself reads chapters from the book. As I record this, they're only on chapter 14, but I'm sure all of the chapters will be up by the time this episode is posted. Also, there is both a Young Reader's edition of the book being read, and the original version. Obviously, the young reader's version would be a bit more family friendly. In a shocking betrayal based on what I said earlier in this episode, my next book doesn't feature a dog. It's about a little, blind, black kitty. Personally, I am the proud cat parent of a black kitty named Cleo. I

adopted her when I lived in Orlando, and she's my senior cat citizen of a little Florida panther. How could I not include a book that features another little Florida panther? The book is called "Homer's Odyssey: A Fearless Feline Tale, or How I Learned about Love and Life with a Blind Wonder Cat," written by Gwen Cooper. Guys, Homer is an absolutely amazing cat. Amazing. Some of the cat antics that Gwen describes in this book aren't just amazing for a blind cat, they're amazing for any cat. My cat can get riled up and run around in crazy kitty-cat style, but I don't remember her reaching quite the level of nuts that Homer evidently does. Although, to be fair, I got my Cleo when she was about three, so I did miss all of her baby cat antics. By far the most impressive bit in the book, to me, is when Homer scares off an intruder. Gwen recounts that one night she was awakened by a cat growling. Did you know that cats can growl? I've only heard mine do it once, and boy, it's a distinctive sound. I'll never forget it. In any case, she hears Homer growling and flips on the light only to find an male intruder at the foot of her bed. Which sounds like a pretty horrifying situation to find yourself in! Gwen calls 911 for help, but Homer quickly jumps into action and charges the guy. And though a housecat might not sound crazy, I'm pretty sure you might run too if you saw a bunch of claws and teeth coming at you. That guy was out of there. What an amazing, heroic cat. Hearing his journey from a very young kitten who was struggling with an eye infection and ultimately went blind, and then how he turned into a confident cat was really great. He even survives a move from Miami to New York, and I know firsthand how much a little Florida panther can be freaked out by snow and such a big change in environment! I have to say, as much of a feel good story as this one is, reading Gwen's account of what happened on 9/11 was heart wrenching. She only lived a short distance from the World Trade Center and couldn't get to her cats for three days. I can only imagine being in such a situation and how much panic she must have felt. But don't worry: she does get to them. And Gwen doesn't leave us at that incident. We follow her life and the life of Homer plus his two older kitty sisters as they age gracefully. Guys, this is a great story. Makes me want to run out and adopt another cat, but I don't think my Cleo would react too kindly to that. It struck me while I was putting this episode together that all of the books take place roughly at the same time. I'm not sure what the odds of that are, but it's just something I found kind of amusing. And this is, of course, the end of our mini-episode! I hope that this provided a little entertainment for you. All of the books that I mentioned will be in our show notes. Subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. You can reach us through the library's website or the Facebook page. Be sure to use the #notyourmotherslibrary. Thanks so much for listening and, until next time, happy reading! Bye!

(Brief outro music)