

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 25: Tails and Tales

(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.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel.

Leah: Today we're going to be introducing the theme for this year's summer reading program, Tales and Tails. Now, since you can't see the spelling of what I'm saying, I'm talking like 'animal tails' and 'fairy tales'. Hope that helps clarify it. Summer reading in school-aged children is critical for retaining skills learned at school during the break. In adults, it provides an opportunity to read for their own personal enrichment as life-long learners. And what's better for earning badges for reading and completing different summer related tasks? You can find more information about our summer reading program at oakcreeklibrary.org/src, or by visiting our homepage and selecting 'Summer Reading Challenge' from the drop-down events menu. You can find links to register on that page, and see all the details. Summer reading starts June 1st! We thought we'd take the opportunity this month to discuss some of our favorite materials from childhood, or particular children's materials we adore.

Rachel: While all reading materials qualify in our challenge, we think it's kind of neat to try and find books that coincide with the topic. 'Tails and Tales' is—obviously—animal-centric, so we have some great recommendations for stories that are either about animals or that feature them as main characters. I know that getting kids interested in reading can sometimes be difficult. One way to encourage literacy is introducing your child to graphic novels. These books are picture-heavy but can contain a fair amount of dialogue depending on the series and its intended audience. They are generally geared toward grade and middle schoolers as opposed to infants and toddlers. I have a bunch of family-friendly picks, so buckle up! All of the comics I am going to talk about are deemed appropriate for children in grades one through five, except for a few toward the end that will be of greater interest to those in grades four through eight. I will let you know all of those before they come up, so don't worry about that. These graphic novels are also pretty light-hearted. The vast majority could be considered satire, but there's nuance within every story. All right, first we have a series that will appeal to lovers of marine life: "Narwhal and Jelly" by Ben Clanton. "A happy-go-lucky, waffle-loving narwhal and a cynical, no-nonsense jellyfish forge an unlikely friendship and share adventures while exploring the ocean together." The art style reminds me on a mid-noughties online comic, and the humor will appeal both to young kids and their parents. There's this scene in the first volume where Jelly is kind of ribbing on Narwhal, saying things like, "Hey dude, what's up with that weird horn? That can't be real. Things like you don't really exist, mmkay? Why is that even sticking out of your

head?" To which Narwhal replies, "Because I'm awesome like that." And all Jelly can say is, "...okay yeah it's pretty awesome." Next up, "Bird and Squirrel" by James Burks. "Squirrel is afraid of his own shadow. Bird doesn't have a care in the world." These two become good friends and go on wild adventures. If your child has a lot of energy and likes to spend time outside, then chances are they will really enjoy these adventure-themed stories. The art looks as though it's straight out of an animated cartoon series, which is a lot of fun. If your children are more into solving mysteries, set them up with "InvestiGators" by John Patrick Green. "With their very exciting spy technology and their tried-and-true, toilet-based travel techniques—"

Leah: Mhm.

Rachel: (laughs) "—the InvestiGators are undercover and on the case!" Yes, our protagonists are alligators 'Mango' and 'Brash'...like 'Tango' and 'Cash'. Adorable. When these two are introduced, Brash yells, "Mango! Get offa my case!" 'cause he's standing on top of his suitcase. (laughs)

Leah: (laughs)

Rachel: That is my kind of humor.

Leah: Mine, too.

Rachel: Yeah, that, or we never actually grew into fully-formed adults.

Leah: That, too!

Rachel: Yeah! If you can't get enough, either, you might be interested in the crime-solving duo Geronimo and Thea Stilton. These characters originated in a separate series of early to middle-grade chapter books, so I would not be surprised if you have already heard of them. Geronimo runs "The Rodent's Gazette," which is, apparently, "Mouse Island's most famous newspaper."

Leah: (laughs)

Rachel: I did not make that pun—I got it off of the Scholastic website. (laughs) Anyway, Thea is a special correspondent for the Gazette, and together she and Geronimo travel the globe, going on adventures and puzzling their way through many a mystery. If you want more mice—and who doesn't?—try "Babymouse." Join the titular character as she goes through the trials and tribulations of grade school. This is probably one of the longest graphic novel series I am going to mention today. There are 20 volumes, and that's not even counting the spinoff "Babymouse: Tales from the Locker" that graduates her into middle school. They are all relatively short, though, so individual volumes are ideal if you just need a quick read. Author Jennifer Holm also writes the popular "Sunny" series and has won a metric ton of awards, so she comes highly recommended.

Leah: All right, the very first series I thought of were some books I was obsessed with when I was a kiddo. I mean, I begged my parents to get me these books at the Scholastic Book Fair—who remembers those?

Rachel: I do!

Leah: Anyways, when the book fair came around, that was my chance to stock up on all the new “Animorph” books. This is a series by Katherine Applegate. Upon looking it up for this episode, I learned that there are 54 books in the series.

Rachel: Jeez.

Leah: Plus ten more companion books. So, 64! I can honestly say I didn’t read all of those as a kid. I definitely have some catching up to do. In any case, let me give you a dramatic reading about the very first book in the series.

Rachel: Please do.

Leah: “The Earth is being invaded, but no one knows about it. When Jake, Rachel, Tobias, Cassie, and Marco stumble upon a downed alien spaceship and its dying pilot, they’re given an incredible power—they can transform into any animal they touch. With it, they become Animorphs, the unlikely champions in a secret war for the planet. And the enemies they’re fighting could be anyone...even the people closest to them.” I mean, these kids get to transform into any animal they’ve touched. Any! What an incredible thing. That blew my 1996 grade-school mind way open with possibilities. In case you needed a little more info, it’s a science-fiction series, with six main characters. Each character takes a turn narrating a book with their own perspective. The major themes are alien invasions, war, morality, family, and growing up. They’re pretty fast paced, and they’re intended for grades three to seven. If you’re into picking books by Lexile range, these are at about a 610. Similar titles or series you might also enjoy would be the “Earthfall” trilogy by Mark Walden, “Last Day on Mars” by Kevin Emerson, or heck, “Animorphs” themselves have been made into some graphic novels. You might enjoy those, too.

Rachel: That’s great, because I have even more graphic novel recommendations for your kiddos. The series I am about to mention is probably one of the most popular, ever, period. It’s always flying off the shelf here at Oak Creek Library and has done for years. Every time there’s a new publication I am bound to order multiple copies to meet demand. That’s right, it’s Dav Pilky’s “Dog Man.”

Leah: That’s a good one.

Rachel: He’s “a crimefighter with the head of a police dog and the body of a policeman, who faces off against his archnemesis Petey the cat.” While I have not read the “Dog Man” series myself, I happily recommend it based solely on the titles, because I enjoy classic literature puns.

Leah: Who doesn’t?

Rachel: There's "Lord of the Fleas," "A Tale of Two Kitties," "Brawl of the Wild," "Fetch-22," and—my personal favorite—"For Whom the Ball Rolls."

Leah: Mm. Mhm.

Rachel: Pilky is one of those authors young children just adore. He also wrote the "Captain Underpants" and the "Ricky Ricotta" books. However, if your kid prefers villains to superheroes—no judgement, just saying—then I recommend "The Bad Guys" by Aaron Blabey. Mr. Wolf, Mr. Shark, Mr. Snake, and Mr. Piranha are more...villains by default. They want to be heroes but aren't exactly cut out for that line of work. The art of "The Bad Guys" is primarily done in black and white, which makes for a nice change and is aesthetically appropriate given that we're dealing with some dark-side shenanigans. And here is where I do a complete 180, because now I need to recommend the rainbows and sparkles and butterflies graphic novel titled "Phoebe and her Unicorn" by Dana Simpson. Listen to this snippet of the blurb from the back of the first volume: "Do you believe in unicorns? Phoebe does. She has no choice. One day she skipped a rock across a pond, and hit a unicorn in the face."

Leah: Oh, no.

Rachel: Heh. "Improbably, this resulted in a lasting friendship between Phoebe and the unicorn, one Marigold Heavenly Nostrils. Come along for the ride with Phoebe, as she deals with the usual burdens of childhood (cruel classmates, gym class, piano lessons) and also some unusual ones (magic hair, candy-breathing dragons, and the legendary Shield of Boringness). Can a precocious little girl and a self-absorbed mythical forest creature find common ground?" Well, you'll just have to read it to find out, listeners. If you want even more cuteness, try the "Tea Dragon" fantasy series by Kay O'Neill. This wins my award for prettiest art style, and this series has the added bonus of being LGBTQ-positive. The hardcover editions are also big. Not 'thick', but 'big' in that they measure twelve and a half by nine inches in size.

Leah: Wow.

Rachel: Right? They're almost along the lines of a picture book. I mean, we are talking about dragons, here, so everything would have to be big, right?

Leah: Mhm.

Rachel: Before I turn things back over to Leah, I have one last graphic novel that I absolutely must talk about. It's realistic fiction...completely unrelated to superheroes, unicorns, and dragons. "Mr. Wolf's Class" by Aron Nels Steinke follows a new elementary school teacher who is trying to handle a class full of rambunctious fourth-graders. This series is completely charming and reminds me a lot of Marc Brown's "Arthur" in that the characters are anthropomorphic. Therefore, if your children enjoy those picture books or the TV show, then "Mr. Wolf's Class" should be right up their alley.

Leah: Gosh, sort in the same vein my next book and series pick is “Redwall” by Brian Jacques. This series features a mouse community, Mossflower Wood, that is threatened by evil rats. They have vowed to overtake Redwall Abbey. Our hero, Matthias the Mouse, is the ‘chosen one’ who must find and use a sword left to his abbey by a legendary hero. In doing so, he’ll become legendary himself. This series has 22 books in it, and again, I’m not sure as a kiddo if I finished them all. What I remember about these books is that my brother introduced me to them; they were one of his favorites. And if my brother liked it, it was good enough for his little sister to try.

Rachel: (laughs)

Leah: I loved the medieval setting, the fantastical world that Jacques created, and the adventure. The major theme is a magical quest, and the book is described as fast paced, action-packed, witty, and with a large cast of characters. This one is geared for a grade range of four to eight, with a Lexile of 800. A similar series, with a Lexile of 770, is the “Warriors” series by Erin Hunter. That series features cats who are on an epic quest to save their world. If you, or your kiddo, is looking for mice that are working to save our world, look no further than “Mouseheart” series by Lisa Fiedler.

Rachel: Here is your friendly reminder that this last set of graphic novels I am going to discuss now is geared toward children in grades four through eight. So, if you have a younger child, maybe wait a few years before checking these out from the library. The other thing that these series have in common is that they are all about cats which, obviously, explains my interest. “Catwad” by Jim Benton introduces the character Catwad. Heh. Duh. “He’s blue, he’s a bit of a grouch, and his best friend is a happy-go-lucky cat named Blurmp who can see the bright side of anything. From pizza and computers to love and happiness, this burball has a funny take on just about everything, and he’s not afraid to share it.” The art in this comedy series is reminiscent of Saturday morning cartoons. In the first volume, Blurmp admits that he loves literally everything, so Catwad asks, “Well, what about hatred? Are you telling me that you love that?” A question that would break most people’s minds, to be sure. However, Blurmp thinks about it and decides that he does in fact, love hatred, because it’s Catwad’s favorite thing and Blurmp loves him.

Leah: Mhm, mhm.

Rachel: Aw. Isn’t that wholesome? Kind of?

Leah: Kind of.

Rachel: Hm. Catwad then spits out his coffee and yells at his friend to stop ruining everything. So, yes, the satire permeating that interaction and those like it might be lost on younger tykes. You have been warned. Next up is “CatStronauts” by Drew Brockington. It’s kitties in space, with little spacey-wacey suits and dangerous spacey-wacey missions!

Leah: Yes.

Rachel: (laughs) Just trust me on this one: if you like your cats cute and your science accessible, “CatStronauts” does not disappoint. In one story, our elite cat astronauts are sent to the International Space Station to make repairs to the “Hubba Bubba Telescope.” Mmhm. Only—gasp! Tragedy strikes!

Leah: Oh no!

Rachel: The mission goes awry, and “Captain Waffles is forced to orbit the Earth in nothing but his spacesuit.” Nooooo! So. That gives you a pretty clear picture of what to expect.

Leah: Mhm.

Rachel: Last but not least, I’m going to highlight “Chi’s Sweet Adventures” by Kanata Konami. This is actually based on a CG television series that is itself based on the original Japanese manga “Chi’s Sweet Home” which touts itself as being “manga’s most famous cat comic.” Made up of short stories, these collections are very cute and—I think—make for good introduction literature if your child wants to branch out into reading more manga instead of the western graphic novels they may be used to. And with that, we have hit our cat quota for the day! (ta-da, cat meow, and bike horn sound effects)

Leah: I went ahead and consulted one of our amazing children’s librarians for a few hidden gems to mention for this next bit. Her first recommendation was the series “Spirit Animals” by Brandon Mull. In this series, “in the world Erdas, every child who comes of age must discover if they have a spirit animal. A special, “rare bond between human and beast that bestows great powers to both.” They’ll need these powers to defeat a dark force that “has risen from distant and long-forgotten lands” and which “has begun an onslaught that will ravage the world.” These are part engrossing book series, part action role-playing game, with a fast, adventure-driven pace. Recommended for grades three to seven, with a Lexile of 680. Her next suggestion was to feature Erin Hunter, who writes both the “Seekers” and the “Warriors” series. Does that sound familiar?

Rachel: It does.

Leah: It should, since I mentioned her “Warriors” series as a readalike to “Redwall.” I’ll give a little attention to “Seekers,” in that case. Y’all, this series features bears. Polar bears! Grizzlies! Black bears! I don’t know why that strikes me as being so super cool, but it does. Anyway, three young bears are separated from their families. “Fate brings them together,” and they navigate through “the dangerous world of wild bears. Along the way, they will face great danger, terrible tragedies, new landscapes, and situations that require all their ingenuity to survive.” I mean, that sure piques my interest.

Rachel: Sure.

Leah: This one is recommended for grades four to eight with a Lexile of 840. I hope any of the books I mentioned inspire you to either grab one of them or read, or maybe to grab one of your own childhood favorites to revisit.

Rachel: That is the end of our show! Leah and I hope that you are able to participate in this year's Summer Reading Challenge.

Leah: Sure do!

Rachel: Check the show notes for a registration link as well as a list of all the recommended reads we discussed this episode. Please remember to subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. You can reach us through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by using the #NotYourMothersLibrary. Until next time, happy reading.

Leah and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)

Leah: (laughs) Okay.

Rachel: Here we go!