

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 31: The Spice Scale

(Brief intro music)

Rachel: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Rachel

Leah: And I'm Leah.

Rachel: It's nice to be back after our holiday hiatus. We have a slew of new ideas for 2022, starting off with this episode! Because it's February, everyone knows that Valentine's Day is coming up quick. It's that time of year for cards, candy hearts, and other signs of affection, so we will take this as the perfect opportunity it is to recommend some romance novels. Romance as a genre encompasses all sorts of books. There is contemporary, or 'modern' romance, as opposed to 'period' romance that goes hand in hand with historical fiction. If you prefer fantasy, you can take your pick from the paranormal romance subgenre. And, of course, you might prefer your trysts slightly more scandalous, or maybe even erotic. Situated polar opposite to that is sweet romance, which is known for being heartwarming instead of saucy. If you're struggling to find something of interest even after listening to today's episode of the podcast, Oak Creek Public Library does offer a variety of booklists. You can find them all on our website at oakcreeklibrary.org/booklists. I will also add a link to the show notes. And, if you have ever tried one of these subgenres and disliked it, I'd say it is worth giving romance as a whole another a shot. The writing itself can be incredibly varied. To help you make a better decision, Leah came up with a pretty good idea.

Leah: Well, I wouldn't necessarily say I in particular came up with the idea. Um, I realize I might be outing myself on which side of TikTok I belong on, but I'm sure it comes as no surprise that your local librarian might have fallen onto the BookTok side. Booktok is filled with all sorts of fun recommendations from readers, reenactments by folks who love books, and even spoilers and teasers from authors themselves. I have a few favorite BookTok authors that I follow, with the first being Stacey McEwan. Now, she's a forthcoming author so I have her debut fantasy

novel pre-purchased for my Kindle already. She's just so funny, and you can find her under the username "stacebookspace" on TikTok. Another of my favorite authors to follow—though I haven't picked up any of her books yet—is K.D. Robichaux. She really makes relatable, funny content, and if you'd like to follow her on TikTok her username is "authorkdrobichaux." Before, however, you check out her content, I'd like to give you a heads up that her content and writing falls pretty close to a five chilis on the spice scale. Oh, you haven't heard about the spice scale? Well, typically books where the spiciest part is holding hands would rank a one on that scale. Five chilis or above would indicate a prettttty spicy book. Frankly, either relatively graphic in how particular scenes might be written, or for how... 'adventurous' it might be?

Rachel: Eyebrow raise.

Leah: The scale is pretty arbitrary, based solely on the reader's interpretation of the book, but I think it can still give most audiences a decent idea of what to expect. For instance, if you're hoping for some serious hand holding and coquettish glances, I'd recommend staying to the lower end of that spice scale. There are books for each and every reader, though, so don't be shy to ask a librarian for some help in finding new books or new authors—or, heck, new genres to try. Anyway, I'll hop off my soapbox now and get into some actual recommendations for books and authors. Now, I've been a romance reader for...a long time. I've always loved the 'happy ever after' and knowing that things are going to turn out okay in that little piece of escapism that I picked up. A fun fact: I got started reading romance because at the Waukesha Public Library, which was my library growing up, the paperback romance novels were right next to the Young Adult books. I read through what interested me in the Young Adult section and just moseyed on over to peruse paperbacks one day. Found some good stuff to check out! Probably the first genre I started reading in romance were set in the Medieval, Regency, or the Victorian era, or what Rachel mentioned earlier as a period romance. Man, there are so many different great books and authors in that genre. I do realized I've been rambling a bit here...

Rachel and Leah: (laugh)

Leah: So, I think I'll just mention a few of my classic favorite authors in that genre. The first, who I still will pick up new novels by, is Amanda Quick. Eagle-eared listeners might notice I've

mentioned her before. She also writes contemporary romance under 'Jayne Ann Krentz' and futuristic romance under 'Jayne Castle'. Now, older novels by Amanda Quick are straight up historical, period novels, and later ones tend to also have a paranormal twist to them. She typically falls between a one and maybe a two and a half on the spice scale, with the later novels being on the spicier side. Also notable in this genre are some heavy hitters like Julie Garwood—who also writes in contemporary romance—Jude Devereaux, Lisa Kleypas, and Julie Quinn. You might recognize Quinn's name as the author of the novels that inspired the Netflix "Bridgerton" series.

Rachel: Mm.

Leah: I think all of these authors also will fall between a one and a two and a half on the spicy scale.

Rachel: Admittedly, I am more into fanfiction than full-on romance novels. It can be fluffy or fix-it, UST-y or slow-burn, so long as it involves characters from an established work or universe that I already know and enjoy. But I do pick up books from time to time, which invariably means that I've read a romance or two. The first novel that pops into my head is "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Brontë. This is one of those classics that you probably had to read during high school or college, dissecting every page to find symbolism for a term paper. But hear me out: Those Victorians were (singsong) repressed! (normal voice resumes) It comes out all moody 'n' broody and I live for it! The titular character, Jane, is an orphan who becomes a governess for her eventual love interest's daughter, moving out to their vast and somewhat spooky estate. At the heart of their...odd romance are one too many secrets for Jane's liking, and she has a bit of an emotional breakdown that results in her wandering the moors, all destitute and sad and the more I talk about it the more it doesn't sound like a romance.

Leah: (laughs)

Rachel: But it is, I promise. The man playing opposite Jane, Rochester, is the epitome Byronic hero, all dark and cynical. He's a loner to the point of falling into the 'jerk with a heart of gold' trope this genre is so well-known for. Jane is a little too perfect for my liking. She's universally considered 'plain' but is so beautiful on the inside that it almost hurts. Her dynamic with

Rochester is something to behold, though, and it is for that reason I recommend this novel. There have been a few screen adaptations, as well, and I think the Masterpiece Theatre mini-series from 2006 is well done. The 2011 film version is also pretty decent. If you would prefer a read-alike, try "Wuthering Heights" written by Charlotte's sister, Emily Brontë. This is more of a tragedy than a romance, but. Well. They go hand-in-hand, don't they? As for "Jane Eyre," I give it two out of five chilis on the spicy scale. 'cause things...heat up. And by 'heat' I mean fire. There's a fire, and it burns down a building. Literally! But for real, the sexual tension is palpable. Moving swiftly on! Another classic is William Goldman's "The Princess Bride." You'll have most certainly seen the movie of the same name from 1987.

Leah: Mmhm.

Rachel: You might not know, however, that this movie was directly adapted using a screenplay written by Goldman himself. It's got drama, comedy, adventure, and a healthy dose of fantasy but, at its core, "The Princess Bride" is a fairy tale about love reunited. Obviously, given who wrote the screenplay, the movie is a faithful adaptation. I'm loathe to spoil the plot for those who haven't seen it, so I will just say the basic plot revolves around a princess who gets kidnapped and needs to be saved by the love of her life—a man who is willing to overcome all obstacles in order to reach her. This is one chili on the spice scale, because though there is some lewd humor, nothing is outright explicit. Just look forward to a couple of storybook smooches. If you love "The Princess Bride" and need more, you would probably enjoy "Stardust" by Neil Gaiman. This, too, is a fantasy novel about a quest concerning love and longing.

Leah: There are a few super-popular novels that have come out lately that fall into the contemporary romance novel section, and I thought I'd highlight a few of those for you guys. First, are any listeners fans of the TV show "Schitt's Creek?"

Rachel: Yes!

Leah: (laughs) And maybe you're looking for a relatively spicy read at a four or five on the chili scale?

Rachel: Yes!

Leah: Well, have I got a recommendation for you!

Rachel: Woohoo!

Leah: (laughs) "It Happened One Summer" by Tessa Bailey came out in July of 2021. It's the start of a series for her, with the second novel being "Hook, Line, and Sinker" which is expected in March of 2022. Anyways, "It Happened One Summer" is about a spoiled heiress who gets her funds cut off. She's sent to Washington state to learn some lessons about living life in a small town and on her own. For visualization purposes, think Alexis Rose in a fishing village trying to manage a bar.

Rachel: (laughs) Sure.

Leah: Then add a burly, bearded, gruff, and beanie-wearing fisherman who just can't seem to get along with her. But oh no, maybe there are sparks flying?!

Rachel: (laughs)

Leah: We see lots of character development for our faux Alexis, whose real name in the book is Piper, and it turns out that this move might have just been the very best thing for her. Basically, think enemies to lovers and small-town romance kind of vibes. I'll also mention that the author of this book, Tessa Bailey, is another of my favorite authors on TikTok to follow. Again, just super funny, and you can find her under the username "authortessabailey." Okay, next I'd like to talk about "The Love Hypothesis" by Ali Hazelwood. It came out in September of 2021 to pretty darn good reviews all around. The basic premise: Our main character, Olive, is a third-year Ph.D. candidate studying cancer at Stanford University. She's pressured into lying about a relationship by kissing one Dr. Adam Carlsen, a professor there. See, she needed to prove to her friends that she had, indeed, moved on from an old crush. And Dr. Carlsen? He needs to seem like he's invested in staying at Stanford. So, they agree to pretend to date each other, only...is it pretending? Adam is super grumpy and kind of a jerk, but Olive is a sunny, positive girl. And don't opposites attract sometimes? Reviews mention how accurately the STEM science world is portrayed here, and also how real the romance seems. Katherine Fiorillo from Insider describes their romance as awkward and realistic. Also, maybe a four on the spice scale, but Fiorillo

mentions the steamier bits take place just in one chapter. So, if you're not into the heavy end of the spice scale, you could just skim through that part.

Rachel: I've gotta say that I really love a fake dating AU...

Leah: (laughs)

Rachel: So, I think I might pick this one up. (laughs)

Leah: I've also heard it described as, sort of, Kylo Ren and, um...

Rachel: Rey?

Leah: Yeah.

Rachel: Okay, well, I'm definitely getting' that, then. (laughs) Leah knows what does it for me.

Leah and Rachel: (laugh)

Leah: And finally, my next mention falls into the 'enemies to lovers' trope with "Get a Life, Chloe Brown" by Talia Hibbert. This was published in 2019, so it should be pretty easy to get your hands on a copy if you're interested. Goodreads informs me that this one falls probably closer to a five on the spice scale, so keep that in mind, but they also describe it as "sweet." So, a nice combo of sweet and spicy, I guess. This book features a chronically ill young woman who finally decides to make a list to really go out and live life. Sort of what the title implies, I guess. Her list includes: Enjoy a drunken night out. Ride a motorcycle. Go camping. Have meaningless but thoroughly enjoyable sex.

Rachel: Oh!

Leah: Travel the world with nothing but hand luggage. And...do something bad. She finds just the right person to help her in a ginger, motorcycle-riding, gruff handyman turned artist at night. As one might expect, the sparks, they are a-flyin'! You'll have to read it to figure out if Chloe kickstarts her life as she's hoping, though.

Rachel: For my next couple of selections, I am going to get into Young Adult romance. As you can imagine, these titles aren't going to be all that spicy. Two and a half, three chilis maximum,

given the intended audience. They tend to be more explorative / coming-of-age / still-figuring-out-my-feelings stories than full-on hubba-hubba. First up is "The Fault in Our Stars" by John Green. It's a popular work by a popular author, so I'm guessing you've heard of it at some point over the last decade.

Leah: Mmhm, mmhm.

Rachel: Anyhow, this one really tugs the heartstrings, and it made me ugly cry at least twice while reading. Apparently, I like to torture myself with sad love stories involving major character death!

Leah: Cool.

Rachel: But it's well written, and the message is engrossing. If you can handle reading about terminal diseases, then you should definitely read "The Fault in Our Stars." In my opinion, John Green is an impactful writer who captures the teenage frame of mind in a way that is almost frightening. His story follows Hazel, a 16-year-old girl who suffers from thyroid cancer. While attending a support group, she meets and falls in love with Augustus, another teen who has survived a type of bone cancer called Osteosarcoma. Their relationship grows, and they go on an adventure together while dealing—or sometimes not dealing—with the tragic reality of their situation. For diehard fans who have already read this and are looking for something along the same lines, I recommend "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" by Jesse Andrews. As you can probably tell from that title, it also focuses on terminal illness—in this case, leukemia. Weirdly, both titles were originally published only two months apart, which is a crazy coincidence given how alike they are to one another. I think the biggest difference that sets them apart is the fact that the main character in "The Fault in Our Stars" is based on a real-life person whom the author knew, whereas "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" is purely a work of fiction.

Leah: And I'll just insert here, um, as long as we're talking about TikTok during this episode?

Rachel: Sure!

Leah: Um, I think everybody, uh, who's on TikTok should go check out Hank Green—John Green's brother who is pro...probably one of the best TikTokers there is.

Rachel: He is fantastic.

Leah and Rachel: (laugh)

Rachel: My next Young Adult selection is categorized as realistic fiction, but the intimate relationship at its core is really what drives a lot of the plot, so I'm gonna go ahead and label it as romance. It's called "All the Bright Places" and was written by Jennifer Niven. Much like the previous book I mentioned, this has dark overtones, though in this case it has to do with survivor's guilt and suicide. Guess I'm not one for light & fluffy stuff, huh? (laughs)

Leah: Doesn't sound like it.

Rachel: No, we need some mortality to keep us hooked. (laughs) In "All the Bright Places," Violet meets Finch, both of whom deal with depression and suicidal inclinations. They develop a close relationship, but soon we come to understand that one of them might be unable to cope with their deteriorating mental health, far beyond the point of help. Fair warning that this book made me ugly cry, too, but I think that's only possible because of how invested I became in both characters. From what I recall, Finch and Violet's interactions felt incredibly real, with nothing sugar-coated or immersion breaking. It isn't a happily ever after, but the story is hopeful, and there are pinpricks of light along the way that make me remember this book with nothing but fondness. For a readalike, try "Everything, Everything" by Nicola Yoon. It features a similar bond between a young man and woman who are struggling with their own inner turmoil. They come together to eek something more out of their lives, and that can be a beautiful thing.

Leah: All right, I'm going to dive into perhaps my favorite romance genre now: futuristic or paranormal romance. Y'all, I love sci-fi and the thought of space travel, or a crazy, magical world that sits alongside ours without our notice. So imaginative, so fun, and just so great as an escape. I think I'll try and feature authors in the genre who have a number of books written for a proper binge-reading episode. Up first, Ilona Andrews. This is a husband and wife writing duo who have written multiple New York Times bestselling books and series. My personal favorites from them are the "Hidden Legacy" books, "The Edge" series, and the "Kinsmen" series. "Hidden Legacy" and "Kinsmen" are a little bit more sci-fi-based, and "The Edge" is more of a

fantasy. I don't consider any of them super spicy. I'd rank them more of a three on the spice scale. But each series will vary a little bit with that. Now, if you're looking for the spiciest of spicy with an alien twist...

Rachel: Who isn't?

Leah: (laughs) Ruby Dixon is gonna be your girl. You can mostly find these books on Amazon, and they're relatively short and intense stories. 'Straight to the point' might be a better way to describe them?

Rachel: (laughs) Okay.

Leah: One of her series is called "Ice Planet Barbarians." Enough said.

Rachel: Plenty said. (laughs)

Leah: Next, I want pass on a recommendation that was given to me by a patron here. It's a three-book fantasy series, named "Swords and Fire," with the first being "The Tethered Mage," by Melissa Caruso. The basic premise of this world is that some folks are born with magic, and those without magic want to control those who do have it. You know—that old struggle.

Rachel: Definitely.

Leah: We have two characters from very different walks of life. First, Lady Amalia Cornaro, who is an heiress. Next, Zaira, who has only known struggle and living on the streets. These two girls meet and are soon bound. You see, Zaira has a powerful talent that accidentally is set loose, and Amalia is nearby. She automatically reacts to the talent, and ends up controlling it. This binds them together, and they're soon weathering all sorts of political machinations and intrigue. We're told the story from Amalia's point of view, and she also gets to experience a romantic interest. I'd put this romance at a one on the chili scale, as it's more focused on the political fantasy aspect than spice. If you're interested in this series, we have all three books on the shelf right here at Oak Creek. Stop in and grab it for your next read!

Rachel: My last few recommendations are—but of course—graphic novels.

Leah: Mmhm!

Rachel: Firstly, Craig Thompson's autobiography entitled "Blankets." Let me tell you: Oof. This one hits ya right smack in the feels. Imma give this one a four out of five chilis, due to some panels that feature nudity, plus an emotional sex scene. While I don't think that particular scene could be described as "vulgar" in any way, comfort levels lie with the individual reader, so maybe check it out some more on Goodreads before taking the plunge. Anyway, "Blankets" is basically the author's own coming of age story as he tries to reconcile his devout Christian upbringing with his personal spiritual identity. One summer at a Bible camp, he meets a fellow outcast, named Raina, and a strong connection takes hold. It was really interesting to see how things developed between them over time—how their bond was impacted by their upbringings, belief systems, and inner growth. Thompson garnered many accolades for his work after its initial publication in 2003, including Harvey and Eisner Awards in multiple categories. Not to mention it has been translated into nearly 20 languages. It's also thick at approximately 600 beautifully inked pages. That's a heavy boy!

Leah: Mmhm.

Rachel: But it reads quickly...think I finished it in about two or three days. As for readalikes, I suggest "This One Summer" by Mariko Tamaki. This graphic novel has ancillary romance, because, really, it is more of a bildungsroman exploring sexuality, societal shaming, and family dynamics. The art style and overall flavor are reminiscent of "Blankets," though, so definitely give it a try. Lastly, the sweetest romance recommendation I have for you all is "Heartstopper" written and illustrated by Alice Oseman. This started out as a digital Webtoon comic but is now seeing a new release through multiple print volumes. I hear that it is also being adapted into a Netflix series, which is super exciting. "Heartstopper" follows the journey of Charlie and Nick, two boys who attend an English grammar school. Charlie is bullied a lot for being openly gay, and that fuels his growing neuroses. Nick, a popular rugby player, soon befriends Charlie and begins to discover his own sexuality. They're supportive of each other, and the relationship they develop is just so dang wholesome and cute! I feel the urge to wrap both of them in warm blankets and give 'em tea. Oseman has written a few Young Adult books, though I believe that this is their first comic. I especially love the pastel color palette that they use in their illustrations. If you're interested in a readalike, the graphic novel series "Fence" by C.S. Pacat is

a must-read. It's all about rivalries and non-hetero romances at an elite fencing academy. In fact, "Fence" is so popular that there are even a couple tie-in novels. Both of these series are available to check out at Oak Creek Public Library, and digitally either through our online Hoopla database or the free Webtoon app.

Leah: That's all we have time for this episode. Remember to check the show notes for a link to some romance booklists, plus information on all of the great reads we just discussed. We ask that you, our listeners, subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear; it really helps us to get the word out about our little podcast. You can always reach us through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by sending messages to the Oak Creek Public Library. Until next time, happy reading.

Rachel and Leah: Bye!

(Brief outro music)