

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 37: Strong Female Lead

(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, and I am beyond excited to welcome the show's new co-host. I'm sure you were already getting sick of hearing just my voice on the show, so having someone new is good news for everybody. We have a great episode lined up today, so I think we'll start with an introduction. Hi, Mary! Welcome to the team. (laughs) Can you tell listeners a little about yourself?

Mary: Hi everyone! I'm so excited to be a part of this wonderful podcast and talk at all of you.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: I just started as a Reference Librarian in the Oak Creek Library in June, but I've been around since November of last year as a member of the Access Service team. I've earned my BA in Public History in Eau Claire and my Masters of Library and Information Science right around here in Milwaukee at UWM. I used to live just a hop, skip, and a jump away over in Saint Francis, so my fiancé and I were in Oak Creek quite often. My favorite books flipflop between warm, fuzzy romances and spine-tingling horror...or books with both!

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: I'm currently reading "A Stitch in Time" by Kelley Armstrong, which is a warm, fuzzy romance with ghosts and time travel!

Rachel: Ooh!

Mary: As far as interests, I am someone who has so many hobbies that they would love to get into but doesn't seem to quite find the time to do any of them. I have too many houseplants to say that that isn't an interest of mine, but I won't comment on their health.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: My pride and joy are my two Siberian Huskies who are four and five. My advice to anyone who is thinking of getting a husky is: don't do it.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: If you do, make sure that you have a strong vacuum cleaner. (sighs) But that is enough about me, let's dive in!

Rachel: (laughs) Yes, once again, welcome aboard! You're actually the one who brought forward the theme for today's episode, which is all about women-led stories. It seems timely to talk about female protagonists given certain things that are happening in the year 2022. To see why I named the episode "Strong Female Lead," I've linked an opinion piece of a similar title in the show notes. It's written by Brit Marling, who is a filmmaker and actor, and she raises some excellent points about the roles women play in pop culture. But now, let's get things moving with this episode of the podcast. My first pick is a book most of you have probably at least heard about at some point over the last fifteen years. It is "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" by Stieg Larsson. Classified as a mystery thriller, this novel is about the cold case disappearance of Swedish aristocrat Harriet Vagner. Forty years have passed since she went missing, and her wealthy uncle—convinced that she was murdered by someone close to her—hires journalist Mikael Blomkvist to investigate. Our female protagonist comes in the form of one Lisbeth Salander. She's in her early twenties, has a cybergoth vibe, and is a brilliant hacker. The best words I can use to describe her are 'hardened', 'intense', and 'unstoppable'. She's been through some heavy stuff, and all of those experiences have forged her into someone who is utterly ruthless. Lisbeth ends up helping Blomkvist with his investigation, and together they discover corruption and shady dealings inside the Vagner family. This book, which is the first in the "Millennium" series, is uber dark, but also very popular. It spawned multiple films during the early 2010s. I recommend the original Swedish franchise if you want something closer to the book and—in my opinion—better casting decisions.

Mary: Excellent casting.

Rachel: Yes. Lisbeth is not a character whom I envy, but her singular strength is unmatched. It is impossible to look away once you've started experiencing her story. For a readalike, try "White Heat" by M.J. McGrath. Much like "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," this story pairs a young woman with an older man looking into a mysterious disappearance. It takes place in the Arctic, which is a landscape that you'll find endlessly fascinating. I also think everyone should watch a film called "Promising Young Woman," which stars the unparalleled Carey Mulligan. The plot hits some different beats, but the protagonists' conflicts are ultimately similar, and she will stop at nothing to achieve her goal.

Mary: So, for my picks I have always been inspired by women of the past, so I'm going to recommend a few historical fiction titles today! The first one is a book that I finished not too long ago: "The Romanov

Empress: A Novel of Tsarina Maria Feodorovna” by C.W. Gortner with readalike “The Secret Daughter of the Tsar” by Jennifer Laam. “The Romanov Empress” is the story of Maria—or Minnie, as she’s often called—who is Anastasia’s grandmother for all of you familiar with the Russian Tsar’s family...maybe because of a movie that came out in 1997 with an absolute masterpiece of a soundtrack.

Rachel: (laughs) Absolutely).

Mary: The book is written from Minnie’s perspective and shows how family relationships can change when her allegiances shift to Russia from Denmark as she marries the Tsarevich. She becomes more confident and surer in her role even as her world falls apart. Even if you know the history of this family, you’ll still want to read Minnie’s story and see how strong her character is in the midst of life-threatening political plots, loss of loved ones, and personal mistakes. The read-alike, “The Secret Daughter of the Tsar” by Jennifer Laam tells the story of three women who are interconnected in page-turning ways. Veronica meets a man living in LA who might be the Russian heir to the throne, Lena is a servant in the Russian Court in 1902 and pulled into the Tsarina’s plot to help her conceive a son, and Charlotte is a retired ballerina during WWII and just wants to protect her son from the Nazis after a visit from a German officer.

Rachel: Whoa.

Mary: Each of these women have to overcome so much in their respective narratives. You might notice that in “The Secret Daughter of the Tsar,” Minnie—or Maria—is portrayed a little differently. That’s okay, people. One of the fun parts of finishing a book is talking about it.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: You can tell us which Minnie you liked best after you finish both titles.

Rachel: All right. My next pick is actually a character from an adult-themed Marvel comic turned Netflix Original series. In “Alias,” Jessica Jones is an alcoholic, super-powered, private investigator holed up in New York City. She is cynical and sarcastic...and kind of done with people as a whole. Jessica goes up against her greatest adversary—a powerful being known as ‘The Purple Man’ in the comic and ‘Kilgrave’ in the show. He can control people just by talking to them, and it turns out that Jessica was once in his thrall, suffering as one of his countless victims. This story deals with potentially triggering subject matter, so be careful before heading in. But it’s why I chose Jessica as such a strong female lead to begin with; much like Lisbeth Salander, this woman has been through it. She never stops seeking justice,

though, and that kind of resilience in the face of so much evil is inspiring. For a watchalike, I recommend Marvel's "Agent Carter." This TV show is much lighter fare, but still not necessarily family-friendly. The plot surrounds titular character Peggy Carter while she experiences being a female agent at the S.S.R. following World War II. Dunno if ya'll knew this, but plenty of people were extremely sexist in 1940s America!

Mary: No!

Rachel: (laughs) Shocker, I know. Both of these shows are hyper-stylized in their own way, which I believe is perfectly suited to each comic book heroine. "Jessica Jones" is gritty and showcases NYC's underbelly. "Agent Carter" is much more vibrant, and you can really get a sense of America bursting out of the Great Depression.

Mary: My next two picks are two star-studded movies, "The Color Purple" and "The Help."

Rachel: Nice!

Mary: Both movies follow women whose lives are made difficult by racism, poverty, lack of education, and more. "The Color Purple" features Whoopi Goldberg as the incredible Celie who deals with violence from her family and her relationships. For those of you not familiar with these stories, there are several instances of abuse that may be triggering or difficult for some of us to watch. It's important to remember that Alice Walker—author of the novel the movie is based on—has stated that it was inspired by true events. Throughout the film, she's on a journey to find herself, her identity, and her purpose. Just as unbelievable is Sophia, played by Oprah. The audience can see the difference between the persona she has to present and the truth that lies beneath. Sophia also has so much to deal with in terms of violence. She puts on a brave, sometimes arrogant face, but that's to appear stronger than she feels. My watchalike, "The Help," follows a young journalist, Skeeter, who needs assistance writing a home maintenance article in the newspaper she works for. She turns to her friend's maid, Aibileen, for advice. After she hears more about the experience of being a maid firsthand, she enlists more women to help her expose the injustices. Maids are not able to use the same restroom as the homeowners, not able to see their family as they would like, are not paid adequately and, bottom-line, they're not treated with respect.

Rachel: Mmn.

Mary: I won't spoil it, but one of the employers does get her just desserts.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: These two movies are so inspiring because, despite all of the effort to silence them, these women still raised their voices—and pens—to bring attention to the injustices they have experienced.

Rachel: All right. (sighs) My third and final pick is actually kind of similar to Mary's, but totally different to my other recommendations.

Mary: (laughs)

Rachel: The main character is driven just like Lisbeth and Jessica but, unlike them, she has everything to lose. Her story is also the most realistic out of all of them, dealing with race relations and police brutality. In "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas, "Sixteen-year-old Starr Carter moves between two worlds: the poor neighborhood where she lives and the fancy suburban prep school she attends. The uneasy balance between these worlds is shattered when Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Khalil was unarmed. Soon afterward, his death is a national headline. Some are calling him a thug, maybe even a drug dealer and a gangbanger. Protesters are taking to the streets in Khalil's name. Some cops and the local drug lord try to intimidate Starr and her family. What everyone wants to know is: what really went down that night? And the only person alive who can answer that is Starr. But what Starr does—or does not—say could upend her community. It could also endanger her life. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, this is a powerful and gripping YA novel about one girl's struggle for justice." That's ripped straight from the blurb, listeners, and if you aren't hooked already I don't know what else to say! Starr's story is raw, and the author does an impeccable job of dropping you in her shoes. Not only is Starr still a child, but she's a person of color facing off against very real threats. The struggle she faces is systemic, and therefore much larger than what she can handle alone, but we're drawn into the minutia of her thoughts and fears and wants as a pubescent Black girl living in the modern U.S. There is a film of the same name that came out in 2018. It is definitely worth watching, but I do suggest picking up a copy of the book beforehand. But, you know, I'm a librarian, so that's kind of par for the course.

Mary: I'm hitting you again with some more historical fiction. My last picks for today are "Cold Mountain" by Charles Frazier and the 2003 movie of the same name with Nicole Kidman, Jude Law—heh—heh—

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: —and Renee Zellweger. “Cold Mountain” follows the story of Ada and Inman, two Civil War-era people who meet, fall in love, and spend the rest of the story trying to reunite. It goes deeper than that though. Yes, it’s about love and having hope and all of that jazz...

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: ...but it’s overshadowed by the sacrifice and personal growth Ada—and Inman—go through. Ada came from a position of wealth and is hit hard by the consequences of the war both financially and emotionally. She loses her prized possessions, her family, and her will. You may be thinking, “That’s just Gone with The Wind with different actors.”

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: I promise, it’s much more raw than the 1939 film. Ada is so relatable, and her friendship with Ruby who, through lots of tough love, gives Ada the skills she needs to survive the state of North Carolina at the time, really makes this story so worthwhile. The book also highlights a part of the war that the average person maybe doesn’t think about: What happens to the town after all the fighting men have been called away? How do the women protect themselves? Provide for themselves? Especially when all semblance of order and justice have gone and the people are desperate. You’ll cry, but I promise you’ll thank me when you’ve finished the book, or movie, or both. It’s incredibly motivating to think about all the women that have not given up, like Ada and Ruby, and all the other protagonists that we’ve highlighted today. Women that have lived their lives the best they can and have provided such a groundwork for the present day. Every conversation, every action, every book we read informs what we do next. It matters! Let’s read about and watch some exciting, powerful ladies.

Rachel: That’s all we have time for, listeners. Please check the show notes for a list of everything Mary and myself just discussed. You can subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. Remember to reach us through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by messaging @OakCreekLibrary. Until next time, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)

Rachel: This novel is about the cold case disappearance of Swedish aristocrat Harriet Wagner. (pause) I said... (sighs) I put in “Wag” to help with my pronunciation, and then I—(laughs) All right.

Mary: Isn't it "Vagner?"

Rachel: It's— (laughs) It's "Vagner."

Mary and Rachel: (laugh)

Rachel: God damnit.